

POOR MISS FINCH

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"THE WOMAN IN WHITE"



POOR MISS FINCH.

A Novel.

BY

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"THE WOMAN IN WHITE," "NO NAME," "MAN AND WIFE,"
ETC., ETC.

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POOR MISS FINCH.

CHAPTER THE FIRST.

SHE LEARNS TO SEE.

WITH the new morning, certain reflections found their way into my mind which were not of the most welcome sort. There was one serious element of embarrassment in my position towards Lucilla, which had not discovered itself to me when Nugent and I parted at the rectory gate.

Browndown was now empty. In the absence of both the brothers, what was I to say to Lucilla when the false Oscar

failed to pay her his promised visit that day ?

In what a labyrinth of lies had the first fatal suppression of the truth involved us all ! One deception after another had been forced on us ; one disaster after another had followed retributively as the result—and, now that I was left to deal single-handed with the hard necessities of our position, no choice seemed left to me but to go on deceiving Lucilla still ! I was weary of it and ashamed of it. At breakfast-time, I evaded all further discussion of the subject after I had first ascertained that Lucilla did not expect her visitor before the afternoon. For some time after breakfast, I kept her at the piano. When she wearied of music, and began to talk of Oscar once more, I put on my hat, and set forth on a domestic errand (of the kind usually entrusted to Zillah), solely for the purpose of keeping out of the way, and putting off to the last moment the hateful necessity of telling more lies. The weather

stood my friend. It threatened to rain ; and Lucilla, on that account, refrained from proposing to accompany me.

My errand took me to a farm-house on the road which led to Brighton. After settling my business, I prolonged my walk, though the rain was already beginning to fall. I had nothing on me that would spoil ; and, in my present frame of mind, a wet gown was a preferable alternative to returning to the rectory.

After I had walked about a mile further on, the solitude of the road was enlivened by the appearance of an open carriage approaching me from the direction of Brighton. The hood was up to protect the person inside from the rain. The person looked out as I passed, and stopped the carriage in a voice which I instantly recognised as the voice of Grosse. Our gallant oculist insisted (in the state of the weather) on my instantly taking shelter by his side, and returning with him to the house.

“This is an unexpected pleasure,” I said. “I thought you had arranged not to see Lucilla again till the end of the week.”

Grosse’s eyes glared at me through his spectacles with a dignity and gravity worthy of Mr. Finch himself.

“Shall I tell you something?” he said. “You see sitting at your side a lost surgeon-optic. I shall die soon. Put on my tombs, if you please, The malady which killed this German mans was—Lofely Feench. When I am away from her—gif me your sympathies: I so much want it—I sweat with anxiousness for young Miss. Your damn-mess-fix about those two brodders is a sort of perpetual blisters on my mind. Instead of snoring peaceably all night in my nice big English bedt, I roll wide awake on my pillows, fidgetting for Feench. I am here to-day before my time. For what? For to try her eyes—you think? Goot Madam, you think wrong! It is not her eyes which troubles me. Her eyes will do. It is You—and the odders at your

rectory-place. You make me nervous-anxious about my patients. I am afraid some of you will let the mess-fix of those brodder-twins find its way to her pretty ears, and turn her poor little mind topsy-turvies when I am not near to see to it in time. Will you let her be comfortable-easy for two months more? Ach Gott! if I could only be certain-sure of *that*, I might leave those weak new eyes of hers to cure themselves, and go my ways back to London again."

I had intended to remonstrate with him pretty sharply for taking Lucilla to Brown-down. After what he had now said, it was useless to attempt anything of that sort—and doubly useless to hope that he would let me extricate myself from my difficulties by letting me tell her the truth.

"Of course you are the best judge," I said. "But you little know what these precautions of yours cost the unfortunate people who are left to carry them out."

He took me up sharply at those words.

“You shall judge for yourself,” he said, “if it is not worth the cost. If her eyes satisfy me—Feench shall learn to see to-day. You shall stand by, you obstinate womans, and judge if it is goot to add shock and agitation to the exhaustions and irritabilities and bedevilments of all sorts which our poor Miss must suffer in learning to see, after being blind for all her life. No more of it now, till we get to the rectory-place.” By way of changing the subject for the present, he put a question to me which I felt it necessary to answer with some caution. “How is my nice boys?—my bright-clever Nugent?” he asked.

“Very well.”

There I stopped, not feeling at all sure of the ground I was treading on.

“Mind this!” Grosse went on. “My bright-boy-Nugent keeps her comfortable-easy. My bright-boy-Nugent is worth all the rest of you togedder. I insist on his making his visits to young Miss at the rec-

tory-place, in spite of that windy-talky-puff-bag-Feench-father of hers. I say positively—Nugent shall come into the house.”

There was no help for it now. I was obliged to tell him that Nugent had left Browndown, and that I was the person who had sent him away.

For a moment, I was really in doubt whether the skilled hand of the great surgeon would not be ignobly employed in boxing my ears. No perversion of spelling can possibly report the complicated German-English jargon in which his fury poured itself out on my devoted head. Let it be enough to say that he declared Nugent's abominable personation of his brother to be vitally important—so long as Oscar was absent—to his successful treatment of the sensitive and excitable patient whom we had placed under his care. I vainly assured him that Nugent's object in leaving Dimchurch was to set matters right again by bringing his brother back. Grosse flatly declined to allow himself to be in-

fluenced by any speculative consideration of that sort. He said (and swore) that my meddling had raised a serious obstacle in his way, and that nothing but his own tender regard for Lucilla prevented him from "turning the coachmans back," and leaving us henceforth to shift for ourselves.

When we reached the rectory gate, he had cooled a little. As we crossed the garden, he reminded me that I stood pledged to be present when the bandage was taken off.

"Now mind!" he said. "You are going to see, if it is goot or bad to tell her that she has had those nice white arms of hers round the wrong brodder. You are going to tell me afterwards, if you dare say to her, in plain English words, 'Blue-Face is the man.'"

We found Lucilla in the sitting-room. Grosse briefly informed her that he had nothing particular to occupy him in London, and that he had advanced the date of his visit on that account. "You want something

to do, my lofe, on this soaky-rainy day. Show Papa-Grosse what you can do with your eyes, now you have got them back again." With those words, he unfastened the bandage, and, taking her by the chin, examined her eyes—first without his magnifying glass; then with it.

"Am I going on well?" she asked anxiously.

"Famous-well! You go on (as my goot friends say in America) first-class. Now use your eyes for yourself. Gif one lofing look to Grosse first. Then—see! see! see!"

There was no mistaking the tone in which he spoke to her. He was not only satisfied about her eyes—he was triumphant. "Soh!" he grunted, turning to me. "Why is Mr. Sebrights not here to look at this?"

I eagerly approached Lucilla. There was still a little dimness left in her eyes. I noticed also that they moved to and fro restlessly, and (at times) wildly. But, oh, the bright change in her! the new life of beauty which

the new sense had bestowed on her already ! Her smile, always charming, now caught light from her lips, and spread its gentle fascination over all her face. It was impossible not to long to kiss her. I advanced to congratulate, to embrace her. Grosse stepped forward, and checked me.

“No,” he said. “Walk your ways to the odder end of the rooms—and let us see if *she* can go to *you*.”

Like all other people, knowing no more of the subject than I knew, I had no idea of the pitifully helpless manner in which the restored sense of sight struggles to assert itself, in persons who have been blind for life. In such cases, the effort of the eyes that are first learning to see, is like the effort of the limbs when a child is first learning to walk. But for Grosse’s odd way of taking it, the scene which I was now to witness would have been painful in the last degree. My poor Lucilla—instead of filling me with joy, as I had anticipated,—would I really believe have wrung

my heart, and have made me burst out crying.

“Now!” said Grosse, laying one hand on Lucilla’s arm, while he pointed to me with the other. “There she stands. Can you go to her?”

“Of course I can!”

“I lay you a bet-wager you can *not*! Ten thousand pounds to six pennies. Done-done. Now try!”

She answered by a little gesture of defiance, and took three hasty steps forward. Bewildered and frightened, she stopped suddenly at the third step—before she had advanced half the way from her end of the room to mine.

“I saw her here,” she said, pointing down to the spot on which she was standing; and appealing piteously to Grosse. “I see her now—and I don’t know where she is! She is so near, I feel as if she touched my eyes—and yet” (she advanced another step, and clutched with her hands at the empty air)—“and yet, I can’t get near enough to take

hold of her. Oh ! what does it mean ? what does it mean ?”

“ It means—pay me my six pennies !” said Grosse. “ The wager-bet is mine !”

She resented his laughing at her, with an obstinate shake of her head, and an angry knitting of her pretty eyebrows.

“ Wait a little,” she said. “ You shan’t win quite so easily as that. I will get to her yet !”

She came straight to me in a moment—just as easily as I could have gone to her myself if I had tried.

“ Another wager-bet !” cried Grosse, still standing behind her, and calling to me. “ Twenty thousand pounds this time to a four-pennies-bit. *She has shut her eyes to get to you.* Hey ?”

It was true—she had blindfolded herself ! With her eyes closed, she could measure to a hair’s breadth the distance which, with her eyes opened, she was perfectly incompetent to calculate ! Detected by both of us, she sat

down, poor dear, with a sigh of despair. "Was it worth while," she said to me sadly, "to go through the operation for *this*!"

Grosse joined us, at our end of the room.

"All in good time," he said. "Patience—and these helpless eyes of yours will learn. Soh! I shall begin to teach them now. You have got your own notions—hey?—about this colours and that? When you were blind, did you think what would be your favourite colours if you could see? You did? Which colours is it? Tell me. Come!"

"White first," she answered. "Then scarlet."

Grosse paused, and considered.

"White, I understand," he said. "White is the fancy of a young girls. But why scarlets? Could you see scarlets when you were blind?"

"Almost," she answered, "if it was bright enough. I used to feel something pass before my eyes when scarlet was shown to me."

"In these cataracts-cases, it is constantly

scarlets that they almost see," muttered Grosse to himself. "There must be reason for this—and I must find him." He went on with his questions to Lucilla. "And the colours you hate most—which is *he*?"

"Black."

Grosse nodded his head approvingly. "I thought so," he said. "It is always black that they hate. For this also there must be reason—and I must find *him*."

Having expressed that resolution, he approached the writing-table, and took a sheet of paper out of the case, and a circular pen-wiper of scarlet cloth out of the inkstand. After that, he looked about him; waddled back to the other end of the room; and fetched the black felt hat in which he had travelled from London. He ranged the hat, the paper, and the pen-wiper in a row. Before he could put his next question to her, she pointed to the hat with a gesture of disapproval.

"Take it away," she said. "I don't like that."

Grosse stopped me before I could speak.

“Wait a little,” he whispered in my ear. “It is not quite so wonderful as you think. These blind peoples, when they first see, have all alike the same hatred of anything what is dark.” He turned to Lucilla. “Say,” he asked. “Is your favourite colours among these things here?”

She passed by the hat in contempt; looked at the pen-wiper, and put it down; looked at the sheet of paper, and put it down; hesitated—and, again, shut her eyes.

“No!” cried Grosse. “I won’t have it! How dare you blind yourself, in the presence of Me? What! I give you back your sights, and you go shut your eyes. Open them—or I will put you in the corner like a naughty girls. Your favourite colours? Now, now, now!”

She opened her eyes (very unwillingly), and looked once more at the pen-wiper and the paper.

“I see nothing as bright as my favourite colours here,” she said.

Grosse held up the sheet of paper, and pressed the question without mercy.

“What! Is white, whiter than this?”

“Fifty thousand times whiter than that!”

“Goot. Now mind! This paper is white,” (he snatched her handkerchief out of her apron-pocket). “This handkerchief is white, too; whitest of white, both of them. First lesson, my lofe! Here in my hands is your favourite colours, in the time when you were blind.”

“*Those!*” she exclaimed, pointing to the paper and the handkerchief, with a look of blank disappointment as he dropped them on the table. She turned over the pen-wiper and the hat, and looked round at me. Grosse, waiting to try another experiment, left it to me to answer. The result, in both cases, was the same as in the cases of the sheet of paper and the handkerchief. Scarlet was not half as red—black, not one-hundredth part as black—as her imagination had figured them to her, in the days when she was blind. Still, as to this

last colour—as to black—she could feel some little encouragement. It had affected her disagreeably (just as poor Oscar's face had affected her), though she had not actually known it for the colour that she disliked. She made an effort, poor child, to assert herself, against her merciless surgeon-teacher. “I didn't know it was black,” she said. “But I hated the sight of it, for all that.”

She tried, as she spoke, to toss the hat on to a chair, standing close by her—and threw it instead, high above the back of the chair, against the wall, at least six feet away from the object at which she had aimed. “I am a helpless fool!” she burst out; her face flushing crimson with mortification. “Don't let Oscar see me! I can't bear the thought of making myself ridiculous before *him*! He is coming here,” she added, turning to me entreatingly. “Manage to make some excuse for his not seeing me till later in the day.”

I promised to find the excuse—all the more readily, that I now saw an unexpected chance

of reconciling her in some degree (so long as she was learning to see) to the blank produced in her life by Oscar's absence.

She addressed herself again to Grosse.

"Go on!" she said impatiently. "Teach me to be something better than an idiot—or put the bandage on, and blind me again. My eyes are of no use to me! Do you hear?" she cried furiously, taking him by his broad shoulders and shaking him with all her might—"my eyes are of no use to me!"

"Now! now! now!" cried Grosse. "If you don't keep your tempers, you little spitfire, I will teach you nothing." He took up the sheet of paper and the pen-wiper; and, forcing her to sit down, placed them together before her, in her lap.

"Do you know one thing?" he went on. "Do you know what is meant by an objects which is square? Do you know what is meant by an objects which is round?"

Instead of answering him, she appealed indignantly to my opinion.

“Is it not monstrous,” she asked, “to hear him put such a question to me as that? Do I know round from square? Oh, how cruelly humiliating! Don’t tell Oscar! don’t tell Oscar!”

“If you know,” persisted Grosse, “you can tell me. Look at those two things in your lap. Are they both round? or both square? or is one round? and the odder square? Look now, and tell me.”

She looked—and said nothing.

“Well?” continued Grosse.

“You put me out, standing there staring at me through your horrid spectacles!” she said irritably. “Don’t look at me, and I will tell you directly.”

Grosse turned his head my way, with his diabolical grin; and signed to me to keep watch on her, in his place.

The instant his back was turned, she shut her eyes, and ran over the paper and the pen-wiper with the tips of her fingers!

“One is round and one is square,” she an-

swered, cunningly opening her eyes again, just in time to bear critical inspection when Grosse turned round towards her once more.

He took the paper and the pen-wiper out of her hands ; and (thoroughly understanding the trick she had played him) changed them for a bronze saucer and a book. "Which is round ? and which is square of these ?" he asked, holding them up before her.

She looked first at one, and then at the other—plainly incapable (with only her eyes to help her) of answering the question.

"I put you out—don't I ?" said Grosse. "You can't shut your eyes, my lofely Feench, while I am looking—can you ?"

She turned red—then pale again. I began to be afraid she would burst out crying. Grosse managed her to perfection. The tact of this rough, ugly, eccentric old man was the most perfect tact I have ever met with.

"Shut your eyes," he said soothingly. "It is the right ways to learn. Shut your eyes, and take them in your hands, and tell me

which is round and which is square in that way first."

She told him directly.

"Goot! now open your eyes, and see for yourself it is the saucers you have got in your right hand, and the books you have got in your left. You see? Goot again! Put them back on the table now. What shall we do next?"

"May I try if I can write?" she asked eagerly. "I do so want to see if I can write with my eyes instead of my finger!"

"No! Ten thousand times no! I forbid reading; I forbid writing, yet. Come with me to the window. How do these most troublesome eyes of yours do at a distance?"

While we had been trying our experiment with Lucilla, the weather had brightened again. The clouds were parting; the sun was coming out; the bright gaps of blue in the sky were widening every moment; the shadows were travelling grandly over the windy slopes of the hills. Lucilla lifted her

hands in speechless admiration as the German threw open the window, and placed her face to face with the view.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, “don’t speak to me! don’t touch me!—let me enjoy it! There is no disappointment *here*. I have never thought, I have never dreamed, of anything half so beautiful as *this!*”

Grosse looked at me, and silently pointed to her. She had turned pale—she was trembling in every limb, overwhelmed by her own ecstatic sense of the glory of the sky and the beauty of the earth, as they now met her view for the first time. I penetrated the surgeon’s object in directing my attention to her. “See” (he meant to say), “what a delicately-organised creature we have to deal with! Is it possible to be too careful in handling such a sensitive temperament as that?” Understanding him only too well, I also trembled when I thought of the future. Everything now depended on Nugent. And Nugent’s own lips had told me that he could not depend on himself!

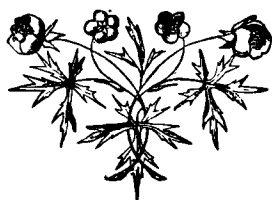
It was a relief to me when Grosse interrupted her.

She pleaded hard to be allowed to stay at the window a little longer. He refused to allow it. Upon that she flew instantly into the opposite extreme. "I am in my own room, and I am my own mistress," she said angrily. "I insist on having my own way." Grosse was ready with his answer.

"Take your own ways; fatigue those weak new eyes of yours—and to-morrow, when you try to look out of window, you will not be able to see at all." This reply terrified her into instant submission. She assisted in replacing the bandage with her own hands. "May I go away to my own room?" she asked, with the simplicity of a child. "I have seen such beautiful sights—and I do so want to think of them by myself."

The medical adviser instantly granted the patient's request. Any proceeding which tended to compose her, was a proceeding of which he highly approved.

“If Oscar comes,” she whispered, as she passed me on her way to the door, “mind I hear of it! and mind you don’t tell him of the mistakes I have made!” She paused for a moment, thinking. “I don’t understand myself,” she said. “I never was so happy in my life. And yet I feel almost ready to cry!” She turned towards Grosse. “Come here, papa. You have been very good to me to-day. I will give you a kiss.” She laid her hands lightly on his shoulders; kissed his lined and wrinkled cheek; gave me a little squeeze round the waist—and left us. Grosse turned sharply to the window, and used his huge silk handkerchief for a purpose to which (I suspect) it had not been put for many a long year past.





CHAPTER THE SECOND.

TRACES OF NUGENT.

“**M**ADAME PRATOLUNGO!”

“Herr Grosse?”

He put his handkerchief back into his pocket, and turned round to me from the window with his face composed again, and his tea-caddy snuff-box in his hand.

“Now you have seen for your own self,” he said, with an emphatic rap on the box, “do you dare tell that sweet girls which of them it is that has gone his ways and left her for ever?”

It is not easy to find a limit to the obstinacy of women—when men expect them to acknowledge themselves to have been wrong. After

what I had seen, I no more dared tell her than he did. I was only too obstinate to acknowledge it to him—just yet.

“Mind this!” he went on. “Whether you shake her with frights, or whether you heat her with rages, or whether you wound her with griefs—it all goes straight the same to those weak new eyes of hers. They are so weak and so new, that I must ask once more for my bed to-night, for to see to-morrow if I have not already tried them too much. Now, for the last time of asking, have you got the abominable courage in you to tell her the truth?”

He had found my limit at last. I was obliged to own (heartily as I disliked doing it) that there was, for the present, no choice left but mercifully to conceal the truth. Having gone this length I next attempted to consult him as to the safest manner in which I could account to Lucilla for Oscar's absence. He refused (as a man) to recognise the slightest necessity for giving me (as a

woman) any advice on a question of evasions and excuses. "I have not lived all my years in the world, without learning something," he said. "When it comes to walking upon eggshells and telling fips, the womens have nothing to learn from the mens.—Will you take a little stroll-walk with me in the garden? I have one odder thing to say to you; and I am hungry and thirsty both togedder—for This."

He produced "This," in the form of his pipe. We left the room at once for our stroll in the garden.

Having solaced himself with his first mouthful of tobacco-smoke, he startled me by announcing that he meant to remove Lucilla forthwith from Dimchurch to the sea-side. In doing this, he was actuated by two motives — first, the medical motive of strengthening her constitution : second, the personal motive of preserving her from making painful discoveries by placing her out of reach of the gossip of the rectory

and the village. Grosse had the lowest opinion of Mr. Finch and his household. His dislike and distrust of the rector, in particular, knew no bounds : he characterised the Pope of Dimchurch as an Ape with a long tongue, and a man-and-monkey capacity for doing mischief. Ramsgate was the watering - place which he had fixed on. It was at a safe distance from Dimchurch ; and it was near enough to London to enable him to visit Lucilla frequently. The one thing needed was my co-operation in the new plan. If I was at liberty to take charge of Lucilla, he would speak to the Ape with the long tongue ; and we might start for Ramsgate before the end of the week.

Was there anything to prevent me from carrying out the arrangement proposed ?

There was nothing to prevent me. My one other anxiety apart from Lucilla—anxiety about good Papa—had now, for some time, been happily set at rest. Letter after letter from my sisters in France, brought me always

the same cheering news. My evergreen parent had at last discovered that he was no longer in the first bloom of his youth. He had resigned to his juniors, with pathetic expressions of regret, the making of love and the fighting of duels. Ravaged by past passions, this dear innocent had now found a refuge from swords, pistols, and the sex, in collecting butterflies and playing on the guitar. I was free wholly to devote myself to Lucilla; and I honestly rejoiced in the prospect before me. Alone with her, and away from the rectory (where there was always danger of gossip reaching her ears) I could rely on myself to protect her from harm in the present, and to preserve her for Oscar in the future. With all my heart I agreed to the arrangements as Grosse proposed them. When we parted in the garden, he went round to the rector's side of the house to announce (in his medical capacity) the decision at which he had arrived—while I, on my side, went back to Lucilla to make the best excuses that

I could invent for Oscar, and to prepare her for our speedy removal from Dimchurch.

“Gone, without coming to say good-bye !
Gone, without even writing to me !”

There was the first impression I produced on her, when I had done my best to account harmlessly for Oscar's absence. I had, as I thought, taken the shortest and simplest way out of the difficulty, by merely inverting the truth. In other words, by telling her that Nugent had got into some serious embarrassment abroad, and that Oscar had been called away at a moment's notice, to follow him and help him. It was in vain that I reminded her of Oscar's well-known horror of leave-takings of all kinds ; in vain that I represented the urgency of the matter as leaving him no alternative but to confide his excuses and his farewells to me ; in vain that I promised for him that he would write to her at the first opportunity. She listened, without conviction. The more perseveringly I tried to account for

it, the more perseveringly she dwelt on Oscar's unaccountable disregard of her claims on his consideration for her. As for our journey to Ramsgate, it was impossible to interest her in the subject. I gave it up in despair.

"Surely Oscar has left some address at which I can write to him?" she said.

I could only answer that he was not sure enough of his movements to be able to do that before he went away.

"It is more provoking than you think," she went on. "I believe Oscar is afraid to bring his unfortunate brother into my presence. The blue face startled me when I saw it, I know. But I have quite got over that. I feel none of the absurd terror of the poor man which I felt when I was blind. Now that I have seen for myself what he is really like, I can feel for him. I wanted to tell Oscar this—I wanted to say that he might bring his brother to live with us if he liked—I wanted to prevent (just what has happened,) his going away from *me* when he wishes to see his bro-

ther. You are using me very hardly among you ; and I have some reason to complain of it."

While she was talking in this mortifying manner, I felt some consolation nevertheless. Oscar's disfigured complexion would not be the terrible obstacle in the way of his restoration to Lucilla that I had feared. All the comfort which this reflection could give, I wanted badly enough. There was no open hostility towards me on Lucilla's part—but there was a coolness which I found more distressing to bear than hostility itself.

I breakfasted in bed the next morning, and only rose towards noon—just in time to say good-bye to Grosse before he returned to London.

He was in high good spirits about his patient. Her eyes were the better instead of the worse for the exertion to which he had subjected them on the previous day. The bracing air of Ramsgate was all that was wanting to complete the success of the opera-

tion. Mr. Finch had started objections, all turning on the question of expense. But with a daughter who was her own mistress, and who had her own fortune, his objections mattered nothing. By the next day, or the day after at latest, we were to start for Ramsgate. I promised to write to our good surgeon as soon as we were established ; and he engaged, on his side, to visit us immediately after. " Let her use her eyes for two goot hours every day," said Grosse, at parting. " She may do what she likes with them—except that she must not peep into books, or take up pens, till I come to you at Ramsgate. It is most wonderful-beautiful to see how those new eyes of hers do get along. When I next meet goot Mr. Sebrights—hey ! how I shall cock-crow over that spick-span-respectable man !"

I felt a little nervous as to how the day would pass—when the German left me alone with Lucilla.

To my amazement, she not only met me with the needful excuses for her behaviour on the

previous day, but showed herself to be perfectly resigned to the temporary loss of Oscar's society. It was she (not I) who remarked that he could not have chosen a better time for being away from her, than the humiliating time when she was learning to distinguish between round and square. It was she (not I) who welcomed the little journey to Ramsgate as a pleasant change in her dull life, which would help to reconcile her to Oscar's absence. In brief, if she had actually received a letter from Oscar, relieving her of all anxiety about him, her words and looks could hardly have offered a completer contrast than they now showed to her words and looks of the previous day.

If I had noticed no other alteration in her than this welcome change for the better, my record of the day would have ended here, as the record of unmixed happiness.

But, I grieve to say, I have something unpleasant to add. While she was making her excuses to me, and speaking in the sensible

and satisfactory terms which I have just repeated, I noticed a curious underlying embarrassment in her manner, entirely unlike any previous embarrassment which had ever intruded itself between us. And, stranger still, on the first occasion when Zillah came into the room, while I was in it, I observed that Lucilla's embarrassment was reflected (when the old woman spoke to me) in the face and manner of Lucilla's nurse.

But one conclusion could possibly follow from what I saw :—they were both concealing something from me ; and they were both more or less ashamed of what they were doing.

Somewhere—not very far back in these pages—I have said of myself that I am not by nature a woman who is easily ready to suspect others. On this very account, when I find suspicion absolutely forced on me—as it was now—I am apt to fly into the opposite extreme. In the present case, I fixed on the person to suspect—all the more readily from

having been slow to suspect him in bygone days. "In some way or other," I said to myself, "Nugent Dubourg is at the bottom of this."

Was he communicating with her privately, in the name and in the character of Oscar?

The bare idea of it hurried me headlong into letting her know that I had noticed the change in her.

"Lucilla!" I said. "Has anything happened?"

"What do you mean?" she asked coldly.

"I fancy I see some change——" I began.

"I don't understand you," she answered, walking away from me as she spoke.

I said no more. If our intimacy had been less close and less affectionate, I might have openly avowed to her what was passing in my mind. But how could I say to Lucilla, You are deceiving me? It would have been the end of our sisterhood—the end of our friendship. When confidence is withdrawn between two people who love each other—everything

is withdrawn. They are on the footing of strangers from that moment, and must stand on ceremony. Delicate minds will understand why I accepted the check she had administered to me, and said no more.

I went into the village alone. Managing matters so as to excite no surprise, I contrived to have a little gossip about Nugent with Gootheridge at the inn, and with the servant at Browndown. If Nugent had returned secretly to Dimchurch, one of those two men, in our little village, must almost certainly have seen him. Neither of them had seen him.

I inferred from this that he had not tried to communicate with her personally. Had he attempted it (more cunningly and more safely) by letter?

I went back to the rectory. It was close on the hour which I had appointed with Lucilla—now that the responsibility rested on my shoulders—for allowing her to use her eyes. On taking off the bandage, I noticed a circumstance which confirmed the conclusion

at which I had already arrived. Her eyes deliberately avoided looking into mine. Suppressing as well as I could the pain which this new discovery caused me, I repeated Grosse's words, prohibiting her from attempting to look into a book, or to use a pen, until he had seen her again.

"There is no need for him to forbid me to do that," she said.

"Have you attempted it already?" I inquired.

"I looked into a little book of engravings," she answered. "But I could distinguish nothing. The lines all mingled together and swam before my eyes."

"Have you tried to write?" I asked next. (I was ashamed of myself for laying that trap for her—although the serious necessity of discovering whether she was privately in correspondence with Nugent, might surely have excused it?)

"No," she replied. "I have not tried to write."

She changed colour when she made that answer.

It is necessary to own that, in putting my question, I was too much excited to call to mind, what I should have remembered in a calmer state. There was no necessity for her trying to use her eyes—even if she was really carrying on a correspondence which she wished to keep secret from me. Zillah had been in the habit of reading her letters to her, before I appeared at the rectory; and she could write short notes (as I have already mentioned) by feeling her way on the paper with her finger. Besides, having learnt to read by touch (that is to say with raised characters), just as she had learnt to write—even if her eyes *had* been sufficiently recovered to enable her to distinguish small objects, nothing but practice could have taught her to use them for purposes of correspondence.

These considerations, though they did not strike me at the time, occurred to me later in the day, and altered my opinion to a certain

extent. I now interpreted the change of colour which I had noticed in her as the outward sign of suspicion on her side—suspicion that I had a motive of my own in interrogating her. For the rest, my doubts of Nugent remained unmoved. Try as I might, I could not divest my mind of the idea that he was playing me false, and that in one way or another he had contrived, not only to communicate with Lucilla, but to persuade her to keep me in ignorance of what he had done.

I deferred to the next day any attempt at making further discoveries.

The last thing at night, I had a momentary impulse to question Zillah. Reflection soon checked it. My experience of the nurse's character told me that she would take refuge in flat denial—and would then inform her mistress of what had happened. I knew enough of Lucilla to know (after what had already passed between us) that a quarrel with me would follow. Things were bad enough already, without making them worse

in that way. When the morning came, I resolved to keep a watchful eye on the village post-office, and on the movements of the nurse.

When the morning came, there was a letter for me from abroad.

The address was in the handwriting of one of my sisters. We usually wrote to each other at intervals of a fortnight or three weeks. This letter had followed its predecessor after an interval of less than one week. What did it mean? Good news or bad?

I opened the letter.

It enclosed a telegram, announcing that my poor dear father was lying dangerously wounded at Marseilles. My sisters had already gone to him: they implored me to follow them without one moment of needless delay. Is it necessary to tell the story of this horrible calamity? Of course it begins with a woman and an elopement. Of course it ends with a young man and a duel. Have I not told you already?—Papa was so sus-

ceptible ; Papa was so brave. Oh, dear, dear ! the old story over again. You have an English proverb : “ What is bred in the bone—” etcetera, etcetera. Let us drop the veil. I mean, let us end the chapter.





CHAPTER THE THIRD.

A HARD TIME FOR MADAME PRATOLUNGO.

QUGHT I to have been prepared for the calamity which had now fallen on my sisters and myself?

If I had looked my own experience of my poor father fairly in the face, would it not have been plain to me that the habits of a life were not likely to be altered at the end of a life? Surely—if I had exerted my intelligence—I might have foreseen that the longer his reformation lasted, the nearer he was to a relapse, and the more obviously probable it became that he would fail to fulfil the hopeful expectations which I had cherished of his conduct in the future? I grant it all. But where

are the pattern people who can exert their intelligence—when their intelligence points to one conclusion, and their interests to another? Ah, my dear ladies and gentlemen, there is such a fine strong foundation of stupidity at the bottom of our common humanity—if we only knew it!

I could feel no hesitation—as soon as I had recovered myself—about what it was my duty to do. My duty was to leave Dimchurch in time to catch the fast mail-train from London to the Continent, at eight o'clock that night.

And leave Lucilla?

Yes! not even Lucilla's interests—dearly as I loved her; alarmed as I felt about her—were as sacred as the interests which called me to my father's bedside. I had some hours to spare before it would be necessary for me to leave her. All I could do was to employ those hours in taking the strictest precautions I could think of to protect her in my absence. I could not be long parted from her. One way or the other, the miserable doubt whether

my father would live or die, would, at his age, soon be over.

I sent for her to see me in my room, and showed her my letter.

She was honestly grieved when she read it. For a moment—when she spoke her few words of sympathy—the painful constraint in her manner towards me passed away. It returned again, when I announced my intention of starting for France that day, and expressed the regret I felt at being obliged to defer our visit to Ramsgate for the present. She not only answered restrainedly (forming, as I fancied, some thought at the moment in her own mind)—she left me, with a common-place excuse. “ You must have much to think of in this sad affliction : I won’t intrude on you any longer. If you want me, you know where to find me.” With no more than those words, she walked out of the room.

I never remember, at any other time, such a sense of helplessness and confusion as came over me when she had closed the door. I

set to work to pack up the few things I wanted for the journey ; feeling instinctively that if I did not occupy myself in doing something, I should break down altogether. Accustomed, in all the other emergencies of my life, to decide rapidly, I was not even clear enough in my mind to see the facts as they were. As to resolving on anything, I was about as capable of doing that as the baby in Mrs. Finch's arms.

The effort of packing aided me to rally a little—but did no more towards restoring me to my customary tone of mind.

I sat down helplessly, when I had done ; feeling the serious necessity of clearing matters up between Lucilla and myself, before I went away, and still as ignorant as ever how to do it. To my own indescribable disgust, I actually felt tears beginning to find their way into my eyes ! I had just enough of Pratlungo's widow left in me to feel heartily ashamed of myself. Past vicissitudes and dangers, in the days of my republican life

with my husband, had made me a sturdy walker—with a gipsy relish (like my little Jicks) for the open air. I snatched up my hat, and went out, to see what exercise would do for me.

I tried the garden. No! the garden was (for some inscrutable reason) not big enough. I had still some hours to spare. I tried the hills next.

Turning towards the left, and passing the church, I heard through the open windows the *boom-boom* of Reverend Finch's voice, catechising the village children. Thank Heaven, he was out of my way at any rate! I mounted the hills, hurrying on as fast as I could. The air and the movement cleared my mind. After more than an hour of hard walking, I returned to the rectory, feeling like my old self again.

Perhaps, there were some dregs of irresolution still left in me. Or, perhaps, there was some enervating influence in my affliction, which made me feel more sensitively than

ever the change in the relations between Lucilla and myself. Having, by this time, resolved to come to a plain explanation, before I left her unprotected at the rectory, I shrank, even yet, from confronting a possible repulse, by speaking to her personally. Taking a leaf out of poor Oscar's book, I wrote what I wanted to say to her in a note.

I rang the bell—once, twice. Nobody answered it.

I went to the kitchen. Zillah was not there. I knocked at the door of her bed-room. There was no answer: the bed-room was empty when I looked in. Awkward as it would be, I found myself obliged, either to give my note to Lucilla with my own hand, or to decide on speaking to her, after all.

I could *not* prevail on myself to speak to her. So I went to her room with my note, and knocked at the door.

Here again there was no reply. I knocked once more—with the same result. I looked in. There was no one in the room. On the

little table at the foot of the bed, there lay a letter addressed to me. The writing was in Zillah's hand. But Lucilla had written her name in the corner in the usual way, to show that she had dictated the letter to her nurse. A load was lifted off my heart as I took it up. The same idea (I concluded) had occurred to her which had occurred to me. She too had shrunk from the embarrassment of a personal explanation. She too had written—and was keeping out of the way until her letter had spoken for her, and had united us again as friends before I left the house.

With these pleasant anticipations, I opened the letter. Judge what I felt when I found what it really contained.

“DEAR MADAME PRATOLUNGO,—You will agree with me, that it is very important, after what Herr Grosse has said about the recovery of my sight, that my visit to Ramsgate should not be delayed. As you are unable, through circumstances which I sincerely regret, to ac-

company me to the seaside, I have determined to go to London to my aunt, Miss Batchford, and to ask her to be my companion instead of you. I have had experience enough of her sincere affection for me to be quite sure that she will gladly take the charge of me off your hands. As no time is to be lost, I start for London without waiting for your return from your walk to wish you good-bye. You so thoroughly understand the necessity of dispensing with formal farewells, in cases of emergency, that I am sure you will not feel offended at my taking leave of you in this way. With best wishes for your father's recovery, believe me,

“Yours very truly,

“LUCILLA.

“P.S.—You need be under no apprehension about me. Zillah goes with me as far as London; and I shall communicate with Herr Grosse when I arrive at my aunt's house.”

But for one sentence in it, I should most as-

surely have answered this cruel letter by instantly resigning my situation as Lucilla's companion.

The sentence to which I refer, contained the words which cast in my teeth the excuses that I had made for Oscar's absence. The sarcastic reference to my recent connection with a case of emergency, and to my experience of the necessity of dispensing with formal farewells, removed my last lingering doubts of Nugent's treachery. I now felt, not suspicion only, but positive conviction that he had communicated with her in his brother's name, and that he had contrived (by some means which it was impossible for me to guess) so to work on Lucilla's mind—so to excite that indwelling distrust which her blindness had rooted in her character—as to destroy her confidence in me for the time being.

Arriving at this conclusion, I could still feel compassionately and generously towards Lucilla. Far from blaming my poor deluded sister-friend for her cruel departure and her

yet crueller letter, I laid the whole fault on the shoulders of Nugent. Full as my mind was of my own troubles, I could still think of the danger that threatened Lucilla, and of the wrong that Oscar had suffered. I could still feel the old glow of my resolution to bring them together again, and still remember (and determine to pay) the debt I owed to Nugent Dubourg.

In the turn things had taken, and with the short time still at my disposal, what was I to do next? Assuming that Miss Batchford would accompany her niece to Ramsgate, how could I put the necessary obstacle in Nugent's way, if he attempted to communicate with Lucilla at the sea-side, in my absence?

It was impossible for me to decide this, unless I first knew whether Miss Batchford, as a member of the family, was to be confidentially informed of the sad position in which Oscar and Lucilla now stood towards each other.

The person to consult in this difficulty was

the rector. As head of the household, and in my absence, the responsibility evidently rested with Reverend Finch.

I went round at once to the other side of the house. If Mr. Finch had returned to the rectory, after the catechising was over, well and good. If not, I should be obliged to inquire in the village and seek him at the cottages of his parishioners. His magnificent voice relieved me from all anxiety on this head. The *boom-boom* which I had last heard in the church, I now heard again in the study.

When I entered the room, Mr. Finch was on his legs, highly excited ; haranguing Mrs. Finch and the baby, ensconced as usual in a corner. My appearance on the scene diverted his flow of language, for the moment, so that it all poured itself out on my unluckily self. (If you recollect that the rector and Lucilla's aunt had been, from time immemorial, on the worst of terms—you will be prepared for what is coming. If you have forgotten this

look back at my sixth chapter—first volume—and refresh your memory.)

“The very person I was going to send for!” said the Pope of Dimchurch. “Don’t excite Mrs. Finch! Don’t speak to Mrs. Finch! You shall hear why directly. Address yourself exclusively to Me. Be calm, Madame Pratolungo! you don’t know what has happened. I am here to tell you.”

I ventured to stop him: mentioning that Lucilla’s letter had informed me of his daughter’s sudden departure for her aunt’s house. Mr. Finch waved away my answer with his hand, as something too infinitely unimportant to be worthy of a moment’s notice.

“Yes! yes! yes!” he said. “You have a superficial acquaintance with the facts. But you are far from being aware of what my daughter’s sudden removal of herself from my roof really means. Now don’t be frightened, Madame Pratolungo! and don’t excite Mrs. Finch! (How are you, my dear? how is the child? Both well. Thanks to an overruling

Providence, both well.) Now, Madame Pratolungo, attend to this. My daughter's flight—I say flight advisedly : it is nothing less—my daughter's flight from my house means (I entreat you to be calm !)—means, ANOTHER BLOW dealt at me by the family of my first wife. Dealt at me,” repeated Mr. Finch ; heating himself with the recollection of his old feud with the Batchfords—“ Dealt at me by Miss Batchford (by Lucilla's aunt, Madame Pratolungo) through my unoffending second wife, and my innocent child.—Are you sure you are well, my dear ? are you sure the infant is well ? Thank Providence !—Concentrate your attention, Madame Pratolungo ! Your attention is wandering. Prompted by Miss Batchford, my daughter has left my roof. Ramsgate is a mere excuse. And how has she left it ? Not only without first seeing Me—I am Nobody !—but without showing the slightest sympathy for Mrs. Finch's maternal situation. Attired in her travelling costume, my daughter precipitately entered

(or to use my wife's graphic expression, 'bounced into') the nursery, while Mrs. Finch was administering maternal sustenance to the infant. Under circumstances which might have touched the heart of a bandit or a savage, my unnatural daughter (remind me, Mrs. Finch; we will have a little Shakespeare to-night; I will read *King Lear*), my unnatural daughter announced without one word of preparation that a domestic affliction would prevent you from accompanying her to Ramsgate.—Grieved, dear Madame Pratolungo, to hear of it. Cast your burden on Providence. Bear up, Mrs. Finch; bear up. — Having startled my wife with this harrowing news, my daughter next shocked her by declaring that she was going to leave her father's roof, without waiting to bid her father good-bye. The catching of a train, you will observe, was (no doubt at Miss Batchford's instigation) of more importance than the parental embrace or the pastoral blessing. Leaving a message of apology for Me, my heartless child (I use

Mrs. Finch's graphic language again—you have fair, very fair powers of expression, Mrs. Finch)—my heartless child 'bounced out' of the nursery to catch her train; having, for all she knew, or cared, administered a shock to my wife which might have soured the fountain of maternal sustenance at its source. *There* is where the Blow falls, Madame Pratolungo! How do I know that acid disturbance is not being communicated at this moment, instead of wholesome nourishment, between mother and child? I shall prepare you an alkaline draught, Mrs. Finch, to be taken after meals. Don't speak; don't move! Give me your pulse. I hold Miss Batchford accountable, Madame Pratolungo, for whatever happens—my daughter is a mere instrument in the hands of my first wife's family. Give me your pulse, Mrs. Finch. I don't like your pulse. Come up-stairs directly. A recumbent position, and another warm bath—under Providence, Madame Pratolungo!—may parry the Blow. Would you kindly

open the door, and pick up Mrs. Finch's handkerchief? Never mind the novel—the handkerchief.”

I seized my first opportunity of speaking again, while Mr. Finch was conducting his wife (with his arm round her waist) to the door—putting the question which I had been waiting to ask, in this cautious form :

“Do you propose to communicate, sir, either with your daughter or with Miss Batchford, while Lucilla is away from the rectory? My object in venturing to ask——”

Before I could state my object, Mr. Finch turned round (turning Mrs. Finch with him) and surveyed me from head to foot with a look of indignant astonishment.

“Is it possible you can see this double Wreck,” said Mr. Finch, indicating his wife and child, “and suppose that I would communicate, or sanction communication of any sort, with the persons who are responsible for it?—My dear! Can you account for Madame Pratolungo's extraordinary question?”

Am I to understand (do *you* understand) that Madame Pratolungo is insulting me?"

It was useless to try to explain myself. It was useless for Mrs. Finch (who had made several abortive efforts to put in a word or two, on her own part) to attempt to pacify her husband. All the poor damp lady could do was to beg me to write to her from foreign parts. "I'm sorry you're in trouble; and I should really be glad to hear from you." Mrs. Finch had barely time to say those kind words—before the rector, in a voice of thunder, desired me to look at "that double Wreck, and respect *it* if I did not respect *him*"—and with that walked himself, his wife, and his baby out of the room.

Having gained the object which had brought me into the study, I made no attempt to detain him. The little sense the man possessed at the best of times, was completely upset by the shock which Lucilla's abrupt departure had inflicted on his high opinion of his own importance. That

he would end in being reconciled to his daughter—before her next subscription to the household expenses fell due—was a matter of downright certainty. But, until that time came, I felt equally sure that he would vindicate his outraged dignity by declining to hold any communication, in person or in writing, with Ramsgate. During the short term of my absence from England, Miss Batchford would be left as ignorant of her niece's perilous position between the twin-brothers, as Lucilla herself. To know this was to have gained the information that I wanted. Nothing was left but to set my brains to work at once, and act on it.

How was I to act on it?

On the spur of the moment, I could see but one way. If Grosse pronounced Lucilla's recovery to be complete, before I returned from abroad, the best thing I could do would be to put Miss Batchford in a position to reveal the truth, in my place—without running any risk of a premature discovery. In other

words, without letting the old lady into the secret, before the time arrived at which it could be safely divulged.

This apparently intricate difficulty was easily overcome, by writing two letters (before I went away), instead of one.

The first letter I addressed to Lucilla. Without any reference to her behaviour to me, I stated, in the fullest detail and with all needful delicacy, her position between Oscar and Nugent: and referred her for proof of the truth of my assertions to her relatives at the rectory. "I leave it entirely to your discretion" (I added) "to write me an answer or not. Put the warning which I now give you to the proof; and if you wonder why it has been so long delayed, apply to Herr Grosse on whom the whole responsibility rests." There I ended; being resolved, after the wrong that Lucilla had inflicted on me, to leave my justification to facts. I confess I was too deeply wounded by her conduct—though I *did* lay all the blame of it on Nu-

gent—to care to say a word in my own defence.

This letter sealed, I wrote next to Lucilla's aunt.

It was not an easy matter to address Miss Batchford. The contempt with which she regarded Mr. Finch's opinions in politics and religion, was more than matched by the strong aversion which she felt for my republican opinions. I have already mentioned, far back in these pages, that a dispute on politics between the Tory old lady and myself ended in a quarrel between us, which closed the doors of her house on me from that time forth. Knowing this, I ventured on writing to her nevertheless, because I also knew Miss Batchford to be (apart from her furious prejudices) a gentlewoman in the best sense of the word ; devotedly attached to her niece, and quite as capable, when that devotion was appealed to, of doing justice to me (apart from *my* furious prejudices) as I was of doing justice to her. Writing in a tone of unaf-

fected respect, and appealing to her forbearance to encourage mine, I requested her to hand my letter to Lucilla on the day when the surgeon reported that all further necessity for his attendance had ceased. In the interval before this happened, I entreated Miss Batchford, in her niece's interests, to consider my letter as a strictly private communication ; adding, that my sufficient reason for venturing to make this condition would be found in my letter to Lucilla—which I authorised her aunt to read as soon as the time had arrived for opening it.

By this means I had, as I firmly believed, taken the only possible way of preventing Nugent Dubourg from doing any serious mischief in my absence.

Whatever his uncontrolled infatuation for Lucilla might lead him to do next, he could proceed to no serious extremities until Grosse pronounced her recovery to be complete. On the day when Grosse did that, she would receive my letter, and would discover for herself

the abominable deception which had been practised on her. As to attempting to find Nugent, no idea of doing this entered my mind. Wherever he might be, at home or abroad, it would be equally useless to appeal to his honour again. It would be degrading myself to speak to him or to trust him. To expose him to Lucilla the moment it became possible was the one thing to be done.

I was ready with my letters, one enclosed in the other, when good Mr. Gootheridge (with whom I had arranged previously) called to drive me to Brighton in his light cart. The chaise which he had for hire had been already used to make the same journey by Lucilla and the nurse, and had not yet been returned to the inn. I reached my train before the hour of starting, and arrived in London with a sufficient margin of time to spare.

Resolved to make sure that no possible mischance could occur, I drove to Miss Batch-

ford's house, and saw the cabman give my letter into the servant's hands.

It was a bitter moment when I found myself pulling down my veil, in the fear that Lucilla might be at the window and see me! Nobody was visible but the man who answered the door. If pen, ink, and paper had been within my reach at the moment, I think I should have written to her on my own account, after all! As it was, I could only forgive her the injury she had done me. From the bottom of my heart, I forgave her, and longed for the blessed time which should unite us again. In the meanwhile, having done everything that I could to guard and help her, I was now free to give to Oscar all the thoughts that I could spare from my poor misguided father.

Being bound for the Continent, I determined (though the chances were a hundred to one against me) to do all that I could, in my painful position, to discover the place of Oscar's retreat. The weary hours of suspense at my

father's bedside would be lightened to me, if I could feel that the search for the lost man was being carried on at my instigation, and that from day to day there was a bare possibility of my hearing of him, if there was no more.

The office of the lawyer whom I had consulted during my previous visit to London, lay in my way to the terminus. I drove there next, and was fortunate enough to find him still at business.

No tidings had yet been heard of Oscar. The lawyer, however, proved to be useful by giving me a letter of introduction to a person at Marseilles, accustomed to conduct difficult confidential inquiries, and having agents whom he could employ in all the great cities of Europe. A man of Oscar's startling personal appearance would be surely more or less easy to trace, if the right machinery to do it could only be set at work. My savings would suffice for this purpose to a certain extent—and to that extent I resolved that they

should be used when I reached my journey's end.

It was a troubled sea on the channel passage that night. I remained on deck ; accepting any inconvenience rather than descend into the atmosphere of the cabin. As I looked out to sea on one side and on the other, the dark waste of tossing waters seemed to be the fit and dreary type of the dark prospect that was before me. On the trackless path that we were ploughing, a faint misty moonlight shed its doubtful ray. Like the doubtful light of hope, faintly flickering on my mind when I thought of the coming time !





CHAPTER THE FOURTH.

THE STORY OF LUCILLA : TOLD BY HERSELF.

IN my description of what Lucilla said and did, on the occasion when the surgeon was teaching her to use her sight, it will be remembered that she is represented as having been particularly anxious to be allowed to try how she could write.

The motive at the bottom of this was the motive which is always at the bottom of a woman's conduct when she loves. Her one ambition is to present herself to advantage, even in the most trifling matters, before the man on whom her heart is fixed. Lucilla's

one ambition with Oscar, was this and no more.

Conscious that her handwriting—thus far, painfully and incompletely guided by her sense of touch—must present itself in sadly unfavourable contrast to the handwriting of other women who could see, she persisted in petitioning Grosse to permit her to learn to “write with her eyes instead of her finger,” until she fairly wearied out the worthy German’s power of resistance. The rapid improvement in her sight, after her removal to the sea-side, justified him (as I was afterwards informed) in letting her have her way. Little by little, using her eyes for a longer and longer time on each succeeding day, she mastered the serious difficulty of teaching herself to write by sight instead of by touch. Beginning with lines in copy-books, she got on to writing easy words to dictation. From that again, she advanced to writing notes; and from writing notes to keeping a journal—this last, at the suggestion of her aunt, who

had lived in the days before penny postage, when people kept journals, and wrote long letters—in short, when people had time to think of themselves, and, more wonderful still, to write about it too.

Lucilla's Journal at Ramsgate lies before me as I trace these lines.

I had planned at first to make use of it, so as to continue the course of my narrative without a check; still writing in my own person—as I have written thus far; and as I propose to write again, at the time when I reappear on the scene.

But on thinking over it once more, and after reading the Journal again, it strikes me as the wiser proceeding to let Lucilla tell the story of her life at Ramsgate, herself: adding notes of my own occasionally, where they appear to be required. Variety, freshness, and reality—I believe I shall secure them all three by following this plan. Why is History in general (I know there are brilliant exceptions to the rule) such dull reading? Be-

cause it is the narrative of events, written at second hand. Now I will be anything else you please, except dull. You may say I have been dull already ? As I am an honest woman, I don't agree with you. There are some people who bring dull minds to their reading—and then blame the writer for it. I say no more.

Consider it as arranged, then. During my absence on the Continent, Lucilla shall tell the story of events at Ramsgate. (And I will sprinkle a few notes over it, here and there ; signed P.)

LUCILLA'S JOURNAL.

East Cliff, Ramsgate, August 28th. — A fortnight to-day since my aunt and I arrived at this place. I sent Zillah back to the rectory from London. Her rheumatic infirmities trouble her tenfold, poor old soul, in the moist air of the seaside.

How has my writing got on for the last week ? I am becoming a little better satisfied with it. I use my pen more easily ; my hand is less like the hand of a backward child than it was. I shall be able to write as well as other ladies do when I am Oscar's wife.

[*Note.*—She is easily satisfied, poor dear. Her improved handwriting is sadly crooked. Some of the letters embrace each other at close quarters like dear friends ; and some start asunder like bitter enemies. This is not to reflect on Lucilla—but to excuse myself, if I make any mistakes in transcribing the Journal. Now let her go on.—P.]

Oscar's wife ! when shall I be Oscar's wife ? I have not so much as seen him yet. Something—I am afraid a difficulty with his brother—still keeps him on the Continent. The tone in which he writes continues to have a certain reserve in it which disquiets and puzzles me. Am I quite as happy as I

expected to be when I recovered my sight ?
Not yet !

It is not Oscar's fault, if I am out of spirits every now and then. It is my own fault. I have offended my father ; and I sometimes fear I have not acted justly towards Madame Pratolungo. These things vex me.

It seems to be my fate to be always misunderstood. My sudden flight from the rectory meant no disrespect to my father. I left as I did, because I was quite incapable of facing the woman whom I had once dearly loved—thinking of her as I think now. It is so unendurable to feel that your confidence is lost in a person whom you once trusted without limit, and to go on meeting that person every hour in the day with a smooth face, as if nothing had happened ! The impulse to escape more meetings (when I discovered that she had left the house for a walk) was irresistible. I should do it again, if I was in the same position again. I have hinted at this in writing to my father ; telling

him that something unpleasant had happened between Madame Pratolungo and me, and that I went away so suddenly, on that account alone. No use! He has not answered my letter. I have written since to my step-mother. Mrs. Finch's reply has informed me of the unjust manner in which he speaks of my aunt. Without the slightest reason for it, he is even more deeply offended with Miss Batchford than he is with me!

Sad as this estrangement is, there is one consolation—so far as I am concerned, it will not last. My father and I are sure, sooner or later, to come to an understanding together. When I return to the rectory, I shall make my peace with him, and we shall get on again as smoothly as ever.

But how will it end between Madame Pratolungo and me?

She has not answered the letter I wrote to her. (I begin to wish I had never written it, or at least some of it—the latter part, I mean.) I have heard absolutely nothing of

her since she has been abroad. I don't know when she will return—or if she will ever return, to live at Dimchurch again. Oh, what would I not give to have this dreadful mystery cleared up ! to know whether I ought to fall down on my knees before her and beg her pardon ? or whether I ought to count among the saddest days of my life the day which brought that woman to live with me as companion and friend ?

Have I acted rashly ? or have I acted wisely ?

There is the question which always comes to me and torments me, when I wake in the night. Let me look again (for the fiftieth time at least) at Oscar's letter.

[*Note.*—I copy the letter. Other eyes than hers ought to see it in this place. It is Nugent, of course, who here writes in Oscar's character, and in Oscar's name. You will observe that his good resolutions, when he

left me, held out as far as Paris—and then gave way as follows.—P.]

“MY OWN DEAREST,—I have reached Paris, and have found my first opportunity of writing to you since I left Browndown. Madame Pratolungo has no doubt told you that a sudden necessity has called me to my brother. I have not yet reached the place at which I am to meet him. Before I meet him, let me tell you what the necessity which has parted us really is. Madame Pratolungo no longer possesses my confidence. When you have read on a little farther, she will no longer possess yours.

“Alas, my love, I must amaze you, shock you, grieve you—I who would lay down my life for your happiness! Let me write it in the fewest words. I have made a terrible discovery. Lucilla! you have trusted Madame Pratolungo as your friend. Trust her no longer. She is your enemy, and mine.

“I suspected her some time since. My worst suspicions have been confirmed.

“ Long ere this, I ought to have told you, what I tell you now. But I shrink from distressing you. To see a sad look on your dear face breaks my heart. It is only when I am away from you—when I fear the consequences if you are not warned of your danger—that I can summon the courage to tear off the mask from that woman’s false face, and show her to you as she really is. It is impossible for me to enter into details in the space of a letter ; I reserve all particulars until we meet again, and until I can produce, what you have a right to ask for—proof that I am speaking the truth.

“ In the meanwhile, I beg you to look back into your own thoughts, to recal your own words, on the day when Madame Pratolungo offended you in the rectory garden. On that occasion, the truth escaped the French-woman’s lips—and she knew it !

“ Do you remember what you said, after she had followed you to Browndown ? I mean, after she had declared that you would

have fallen in love with my brother if you had met him first—and after Nugent (at her instigation no doubt) had taken advantage of your blindness to make you believe that you were speaking to *me*. When you were smarting under the insult, and when you had found out the trick, what did you say?

“ You said these — or nearly these — words :—

“ ‘ She hated you from the first, Oscar—she took up with your brother directly he came here. Don’t marry me at Dimchurch! Find out some place that they don’t know of! They are both in a conspiracy together against you and against me. Take care of them! take care of them!’

“ Lucilla! I echo your own words to you. I return the warning—the prophetic warning—which you unconsciously gave me in that past time. I am afraid my unhappy brother loves you—and I know for certain that Madame Pratolungo feels the interest in *him* which she has never felt in *me*. What you

said, I say. They are in a conspiracy together against us. Take care of them! take care of them!

“When we meet again, I shall be prepared to defeat the conspiracy. Till that time comes—as you value your happiness and mine, don’t let Madame Pratolungo suspect that you have discovered her. It is she, I firmly believe, who is to blame. I am going to my brother—as you will now understand—with an object far different to the object which I put forward as an excuse to your false friend. Fear no dispute between Nugent and me. I know him. I firmly believe I shall find that he has been tempted and misled. I answer—now that no evil influences are at work on him—for his acting like an honourable man, and deserving your pardon and mine. The excuse I have made to Madame Pratolungo will prevent her from interfering between us. That was my one object in making it.

“Keep me correctly informed of your movements, and of hers. I enclose an address to

which you can write, with the certainty that your letters will be forwarded.

“ On my side, I promise to write constantly. Once more, don’t trust a living creature about you with the secret which this letter reveals! Expect me back at the earliest possible moment, to free you—with a husband’s authority—from the woman who has so cruelly deceived us.—Yours with the truest affection, the fondest love,

“ OSCAR.”

[*Note.*—It is quite needless for me to dwell here on the devilish cunning—I can use no other phrase—which inspired this abominable letter. Look back to the third and fourth chapters of the second volume, and you will see how skilfully what I said in a moment of foolish irritation, and what Lucilla said when she too had lost her temper, is turned to account to poison her mind against me. We are made innocently to supply our enemy with the foundation on which he builds his plot. For the rest, the letter explains itself. Nugent

still persists in personating his brother. He guesses easily at the excuse I should make to Lucilla for his absence ; and he gets over the difficulty of appearing to have confided his errand to a woman whom he distrusts, by declaring that he felt it necessary to deceive me as to what the nature of that errand really was. As the Journal proceeds, you will see how dexterously he works the machinery which his letter has set in motion. All I need add here, in the way of explanation, is—that the delay in his arrival at Ramsgate of which Lucilla complains, was caused by nothing but his own hesitation. His sense of honour—as I know, from discoveries made at a later time—was not entirely lost yet. The lower he sank, the harder his better nature struggled to raise him. Nothing, positively nothing, but his own remorse need have kept him at Paris (it is needless to say that he never stirred farther, and never discovered the place of his brother's retreat) after Lucilla had informed him by letter, that I had gone abroad, and

that she was at Ramsgate with her aunt. I have done : let Lucilla go on again.—P.]

I have read Oscar's letter once more.

He is the soul of honour ; he is incapable of deceiving me. I remember saying what he tells me I said, and thinking it too—for the moment only—when I was beside myself with rage. Still—may it not be possible that appearances have misled Oscar ? Oh, Madame Pratolungo ! I had such a high opinion of you, I loved you so dearly—*can* you have been unworthy of the admiration and affection that you once inspired in me ?

I quite agree with Oscar that his brother is not to blame. It is sad and shocking that Mr. Nugent Dubourg should have allowed himself to fall in love with me. But I cannot help pitying him. Poor disfigured man, I hope he will get a good wife ! How he must have suffered !

It is impossible to endure, any longer, my present state of suspense. Oscar must, and

shall, satisfy me about Madame Pratolungo—with his own lips. I shall write to him by this post, and insist on his coming to Ramsgate.

August 29th.—I wrote to him yesterday, to the address in Paris. My letter will be delivered to-morrow. Where is he? when will he get it?

[*Note.*—That innocent letter did its fatal mischief. It ended the struggle against himself which had kept Nugent Dubourg in Paris. On the morning when he received it, he started for England. Here is the entry in Lucilla's journal.—P.]

August 31st.—A telegram for me at breakfast-time. I am too happy to keep my hand steady—I am writing horribly. It doesn't matter: nothing matters but my telegram. (Oh, what a noble creature the man was who invented telegrams!) Oscar is on his way to Ramsgate!



CHAPTER THE FIFTH.

LUCILLA'S JOURNAL, CONTINUED.

September 1st.

I AM composed enough to return to my Journal, and to let my mind dwell a little on all that I have thought and felt since Oscar has been here.

Now that I have lost Madame Pratolungo, I have no friend with whom I can talk over my little secrets. My aunt is all that is kind and good to me ; but with a person so much older than I am—who has lived in such a different world from my world, and whose ideas seem to be so far away from mine—how can I talk about my follies and extravagances,

and expect sympathy in return! My one confidential friend is my Journal—I can only talk about myself *to* myself, in these pages. My position feels sometimes like a very lonely one. I saw two girls telling all their secrets to each other on the sands to-day—and I am afraid I envied them.

Well, my dear Journal, how did I feel—after longing for Oscar—when Oscar came to me?

It is dreadful to own it; but my book locks up, and my book can be trusted with the truth. I felt ready to cry—I was so unexpectedly, so horribly, disappointed.

No. “Disappointed” is not the word. I can’t find the word. There was a moment—I hardly dare write it: it seems so atrociously wicked—there was a moment when I actually wished myself blind again.

He took me in his arms; he held my hand in his. In the time when I was blind, how I should have felt it! how the delicious *tingle* would have run through me when he touched

me! Nothing of the kind happened now. He might have been Oscar's brother for all the effect he produced on me. I have myself taken his hand since, and shut my eyes to try and renew my blindness, and put myself back completely as I was in the old time. The same result still. Nothing, nothing, nothing!

Is it that he is a little restrained with me on his side? He certainly is! I felt it the moment he came into the room—I have felt it ever since.

No: it is not that. In the old time, when we were only beginning to love each other, he was restrained with me. But it made no difference then. I was not the insensible creature in those days that I have become since.

I can only account for it in one way. The restoration of my sight has made a new creature of me. I have gained a sense—I am no longer the same woman. This great change must have had some influence over

me that I never suspected until Oscar came here. Can the loss of my sense of feeling be the price that I have paid for the recovery of my sense of sight?

When Grosse comes next, I shall put that question to him.

In the meanwhile, I have had a second disappointment. He is not nearly so beautiful as I thought he was when I was blind.

On the day when my bandage was taken off for the first time, I could only see indistinctly. When I ran into the room at the rectory, I guessed it was Oscar rather than knew it was Oscar. My father's grey head, and Mrs. Finch's woman's dress, would no doubt have helped anybody in my place to fix as I did on the right man. But this is all different now. I can see his features in detail—and the result is (though I won't own it to any of them) that I find my idea of him in the days of my blindness—oh, so unlike the reality! The one thing that is *not* a disappointment to me, is his voice. When he

cannot see me, I close my eyes, and let my ears feel the old charm again—so far.

And this is what I have gained, by submitting to the operation, and enduring my imprisonment in the darkened room !

What am I writing? I ought to be ashamed of myself! Is it nothing to have had all the beauty of land and sea, all the glory of cloud and sunshine, revealed to me? Is it nothing to be able to look at my fellow-creatures—to see the bright faces of children smile at me when I speak to them? Enough of myself! I am unhappy and ungrateful when I think of myself.

Let me write about Oscar.

My aunt approves of him. She thinks him handsome, and says he has the manners of a gentleman. This last is high praise from Miss Batchford. She despises the present generation of young men. “In my time,” she said the other day, “I used to see young gentlemen. I only see young animals now; well-fed, well-washed, well-dressed;

riding animals, rowing animals, betting animals—nothing more.”

Oscar, on his side, seems to like Miss Batchford on better acquaintance. When I first presented him to her, he rather surprised me by changing colour and looking very uneasy. He is almost distressingly nervous, on certain occasions. I suppose my aunt's grand manner daunted him.

[*Note.*—I really must break in here. Her aunt's “grand manner” makes me sick. It is nothing (between ourselves) but a hook-nose and a stiff pair of stays. What daunted Nugent Dubourg, when he first found himself in the old lady's presence, was the fear of discovery. He would no doubt have learnt from his brother that Oscar and Miss Batchford had never met. You will see, if you look back, that it was, in the nature of things, impossible they should have met. But is it equally clear that Nugent could find out beforehand that Miss Batchford had been left

in ignorance of what had happened at Dimchurch? He could do nothing of the sort—he could feel no assurance of his security from exposure, until he had tried the ground in his own proper person first. The risk here was certainly serious enough to make even Nugent Dubourg feel uneasy. And Lucilla talks of her aunt's "grand manner!" Poor innocent! I leave her to go on.—P.]

As soon as my aunt left us together, the first words I said to Oscar, referred (of course) to his letter about Madame Prato-lungo.

He made a little sign of entreaty, and looked distressed.

"Why should we spoil the pleasure of our first meeting by talking of her?" he said. "It is so inexpressibly painful to you and to me. Let us return to it in a day or two. Not now, Lucilla—not now!"

His brother was the next subject in my mind. I was not at all sure how he would

take my speaking about it. I risked a question however, for all that. He made another sign of entreaty, and looked distressed again.

"My brother and I understand each other, Lucilla. He will remain abroad for the present. Shall we drop that subject, too? Let me hear your own news—I want to know what is going on at the rectory. I have heard nothing since you wrote me word that you were here with your aunt, and that Madame Pratolungo had gone abroad to her father. Is Mr. Finch well? Is he coming to Ramsgate to see you?"

I was unwilling to tell him of the misunderstanding at home.

"I have not heard from my father since I have been here," I said. "Now you have come back, I can write and announce your return, and get all the news from the rectory."

He looked at me rather strangely—in a way which led me to fear that he saw some objection to my writing to my father.

“I suppose you would like Mr. Finch to come here?” he said—and then stopped suddenly, and looked at me again.

“There is very little chance of his coming here,” I answered.

Oscar seemed to be wonderfully interested about my father. “Very little chance?” he repeated. “Why?”

I was obliged to refer to the family quarrel—still, however, saying nothing of the unjust manner in which my father had spoken of my aunt.

“As long as I am with Miss Batchford,” I said, “it is useless to hope that my father will come here. They are on bad terms; and I am afraid there is no prospect, at present, of their being friends again. Do you object to my writing home to say you have come to Ramsgate?” I asked.

“I!” he exclaimed, looking the picture of astonishment. “What could possibly make you think that? Write by all means—and leave a little space for me. I will add a few lines to your letter.”

It is impossible to say how his answer relieved me. It was quite plain that I had stupidly misinterpreted him. Oh, my new eyes! my new eyes! shall I ever be able to depend on you as I could once depend on my touch?

[*Note.*—I must intrude myself again. I shall burst with indignation while I am copying the journal, if I don't relieve my mind at certain places in it. Remark, before you go any farther, how skilfully Nugent contrives to ascertain his exact position at Ramsgate—and see with what a fatal unanimity all the chances of his personating Oscar, without discovery, declare themselves in his favour! Miss Batchford, as you have seen, is entirely at his mercy. She not only knows nothing herself, but she operates as a check on Mr. Finch—who would otherwise have joined his daughter at Ramsgate, and have instantly exposed the conspiracy. On every side of him, Nugent is, to all appearance, safe. I am

away in one direction. Oscar is away in another. Mrs. Finch is anchored immovably in her nursery. Zillah has been sent back from London to the rectory. The Dimchurch doctor (who attended Oscar, and who might have proved an awkward witness) is settled in India—as you will see, if you refer to the twenty-second chapter of the first volume. The London doctor with whom he consulted has long since ceased to have any relations with his former patient. As for Herr Grosse, if *he* appears on the scene, he can be trusted to shut his eyes professionally to all that is going on, and to let matters take their course in the only interest he recognises—the interest of Lucilla's health. There is literally no obstacle in Nugent's way—and no sort of protection for Lucilla, except in the faithful instinct which persists in warning her that this is the wrong man—though it speaks in an unknown tongue. Will she end in understanding the warning before it is too late? My friend, this note is intended to relieve

my mind—not yours. All *you* have to do is to read on. Here is the journal. I won't stand another moment in your way.—P.]

September 2nd.—A rainy day. Very little said that is worth recording between Oscar and me.

My aunt, whose spirits are always affected by bad weather, kept me a long time in her sitting-room, amusing herself by making me exercise my sight. Oscar was present by special invitation, and assisted the old lady in setting this new seeing-sense of mine all sorts of tasks. He tried hard to prevail on me to let him see my writing. I refused. It is improving as fast as it can ; but it is not good enough yet.

I notice here what a dreadfully difficult thing it is to get back—in such a case as mine—to the exercise of one's sight.

We have a cat and a dog in the house. Would it be credited, if I was telling it to the

world instead of telling it to my Journal, that I actually mistook one for the other to-day?—after seeing so well, too, as I do now, and being able to write with so few false strokes in making my letters! It is nevertheless true that I did mistake the two animals; having trusted to nothing but my memory to inform my eyes which was which, instead of helping my memory by my touch. I have now set this right. I caught up puss, and shut my eyes (oh, that habit! when shall I get over it?) and felt her soft fur (so different from a dog's hair!) and opened my eyes again, and associated the feel of the fur for ever afterwards with the sight of a cat.

To-day's experience has also informed me that I make slow progress in teaching myself to judge correctly of distances.

In spite of this drawback, however, there is nothing I enjoy so much in using my sight as looking at a great wide prospect of any kind—provided I am not asked to judge how far or how near objects may be. It seems like

escaping out of prison to look (after having been shut up in my blindness) at the long curve of the beach, and the bold promontory of the pier, and the grand sweep of the sea beyond—all visible from our windows. The moment my aunt begins to question me about distances, she makes a toil of my pleasure. It is worse still when I am asked about the relative sizes of ships and boats. When I see nothing but a boat, I fancy it larger than it is. When I see the boat in comparison with a ship, and then look back at the boat, I instantly go to the other extreme, and fancy it smaller than it is. The setting this right still vexes me almost as keenly as my stupidity vexed me some time since, when I saw my first horse and cart from an upper window, and took it for a dog drawing a wheelbarrow! Let me add in my own defence that both horse and cart were figured at least five times their proper size in my blind fancy, which makes my mistake, I think, not so very stupid after all.

Well, I amused my aunt. And what effect did I produce on Oscar ?

If I could trust my eyes, I should say I produced exactly the contrary effect on *him*—I made him melancholy. But I don't trust my eyes. They must be deceiving me when they tell me that he looked, in my company, a moping, anxious, miserable man.

Or is it, that he sees and feels something changed in Me ? I could scream with vexation and rage against myself. Here is *my* Oscar—and yet he is not the Oscar I knew when I was blind. Contradictory as it seems, I used to understand how he looked at me, when I was unable to see it. Now that I *can* see it, I ask myself, Is this really love that is looking at me in his eyes ? or is it something else ? How should I know ? I knew when I had only my own fancy to tell me. But now, try as I may, I cannot make the old fancy and the new sight serve me in harmony both together. I am afraid he sees that I don't understand him. Oh, dear ! dear !

why did I not meet my good old Grosse, and become the new creature that he has made me, before I met Oscar? I should have had no blind memories and prepossessions to get over then. I shall become used to my new self, I hope and believe, with time—and that will accustom me to my new impressions of Oscar—and so it may all come right in the end. It is all wrong enough now. He put his arm round me, and gave me a little tender squeeze, while we were following Miss Batchford down to the dining-room this afternoon. Nothing in me answered to it. I should have felt it all over me a few months since.

Here is a tear on the paper. What a fool I am! Why can't I write about something else?

I sent my second letter to my father to-day; telling him of Oscar's return from abroad, and taking no notice of his not having replied to my first letter. The only way to manage my father is not to take notice, and to let him come right by himself. I showed Oscar my letter—with a space left at the end

for his postscript. While he was writing it, he asked me to get something which happened to be up-stairs in my room. When I came back, he had sealed the envelope—forgetting to show me his postscript. It was not worth while to open the letter again; he told me what he had written, and that did just as well.

[*Note.*—I must trouble you with a copy of what Nugent really did write. It shows why he sent her out of the room, and closed the envelope before she could come back. The postscript is also worthy of notice, in this respect—that it plays a part in a page of my narrative which is still to come.

Thus Nugent writes, in Oscar's name and character, to the rector of Dimchurch. (I have already mentioned, as you will see in the twenty-second chapter of the first volume, that a close similarity of handwriting was one among the other striking points of resemblance between the twins.)

“ DEAR MR. FINCH,

“ Lucilla's letter will have told you that I have come to my senses, and that I am again paying my addresses to her as her affianced husband. My principal object in adding these lines is to propose that we should forget the past, and go on again as if nothing had happened.

“ Nugent has behaved nobly. He absolves me from the engagements towards him into which I so rashly entered, at our last interview before I left Browndown. Most generously and amply he has redeemed his pledge to Madame Pratolungo to discover the place of my retreat and to restore me to Lucilla. For the present, he remains abroad.

“ If you favour me with a reply to this, I must warn you to be careful how you write ; for Lucilla is sure to ask to see your letter. Remember that she only supposes me to have returned to her after a brief absence from England, caused by a necessity for joining my

brother on the Continent. It will be also desirable to say nothing on the subject of my unfortunate peculiarity of complexion. I have made it all right with Lucilla, and she is getting accustomed to me. Still, the subject is a sore one; and the less it is referred to the better. Truly yours,

“OSCAR.”

Unless I add a word of explanation here, you will hardly appreciate the extraordinary skilfulness with which the deception is continued by means of this postscript.

Written in Oscar's character (and representing Nugent as having done all that he had promised me to do) it designedly omits the customary courtesy of Oscar's style. The object of this is to offend Mr. Finch—with what end in view you will presently see. The rector was the last man in existence to dispense with the necessary apologies and expressions of regret from a man engaged to his daughter, who had left her as Oscar had

left her—no matter how the circumstances might appear to excuse him. The curt, off-hand postscript signed “Oscar” was the very thing to exasperate the wound already inflicted on Mr. Finch’s self-esteem, and to render it at least probable that he would reconsider his intention of himself performing the marriage ceremony. In the event of his refusal, what would happen? A stranger entirely ignorant of which was Nugent and which was Oscar, would officiate in his place. Do you see it now?

But even the cleverest people are not always capable of providing for every emergency. The completest plot generally has its weak place.

The postscript, as you have seen, was a little masterpiece. But it nevertheless exposed the writer to a danger which (as the Journal will tell you) he only appreciated at its true value when it was too late to alter his mind. Finding himself forced, for the sake of appearances, to permit Lucilla to inform

her father of his arrival at Ramsgate, he was now obliged to run the risk of having that important piece of domestic news communicated—either by Mr. Finch or by his wife—to no less a person than myself. You will remember that worthy Mrs. Finch, when we parted at the rectory, had asked me to write to her while I was abroad—and you will see, after the hint I have given you, that clever Mr. Nugent is beginning already to walk upon delicate ground. I say no more: Lucilla's turn now.—P.]

September 3rd.—Oscar has (I suppose) forgotten something which he ought to have included in his postscript to my letter.

More than two hours after I had sent it to the post, he asked if the letter had gone. For the moment, he looked annoyed when I said, Yes. But he soon recovered himself. It mattered nothing (he said); he could easily write again. “Talking of letters,” he added, “do you expect Madame Pratolungo to write

to you ?” (This time, it was he who referred to her !) I told him that there was not much chance, after what had passed on her side and on mine, of her writing to me—and then tried to put some of those questions about her which he had once already requested me not to press yet. For the second time, he entreated me to defer the discussion of that unpleasant subject for the present—and yet, with a curious inconsistency, he made another inquiry relating to the subject in the same breath.

“Do you think she is likely to be in correspondence with your father, or your step-mother, while she is out of England ?” he asked.

“I should doubt her writing to my father,” I said. “But she might correspond with Mrs. Finch.”

He considered a little—and then turned the talk to the topic of our residence at Ramsgate next.

“How long do you stay here ?” he inquired.

“It depends on Herr Grosse,” I answered.
“I will ask him when he comes next.”

He turned away to the window—suddenly, as if he was a little put out.

“Are you tired of Ramsgate already?” I asked.

He came back to me, and took my hand—my cold insensible hand that won’t feel his touch as it ought!

“Let me be your husband, Lucilla,” he whispered; “and I will live at Ramsgate if you like—for your sake.”

Although there was everything to please me in those words, there was something that startled me—I cannot describe it—in his look and manner when he said them. I made no answer at the moment. He went on.

“Why should we not be married at once?” he asked. “We are both of age. We have only ourselves to think of.”

[*Note.*—Alter his words as follows: “Why should we not be married before Madame

Pratolungo can hear of my arrival at Ramsgate?"—and you will rightly interpret his motives. The situation is now fast reaching its climax of peril. Nugent's one chance is to persuade Lucilla to marry him before any discoveries can reach my ears, and before Grosse considers her sufficiently recovered to leave Ramsgate.—P.]

"You forget," I answered, more surprised than ever; "we have my father to think of. It was always arranged that he was to marry us at Dimchurch."

Oscar smiled—not at all the charming smile I used to imagine, when I was blind!

"We shall wait a long time, I am afraid," he said, "if we wait until your father marries us."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"When we enter on the painful subject of Madame Pratolungo," he replied, "I will tell you. In the meantime, do you think Mr. Finch will answer your letter?"

"I hope so."

"Do you think he will answer my post-script?"

"I am sure he will!"

The same unpleasant smile showed itself again in his face. He abruptly dropped the conversation, and went to play *piquet* with my aunt.

All this happened yesterday evening. I went to bed, sadly dissatisfied with somebody. Was it with Oscar? or with myself? or with both? I fancy with both.

To-day, we went out together for a walk on the cliffs. What a delight it was to move through the fresh briny air, and see the lovely sights on every side of me! Oscar enjoyed it too. All through the first part of our walk, he was charming, and I was more in love with him than ever. On our return, a little incident occurred which altered him for the worse, and which made my spirits sink again.

It happened in this way.

I proposed returning by the sands. Rams-

gate is still crowded with visitors ; and the animated scene on the beach in the later part of the day has attractions for me, after my blind life, which it does not (I dare say) possess for people who have always enjoyed the use of their eyes. Oscar, who has a nervous horror of crowds, and who shrinks from contact with people not so refined as himself, was surprised at my wishing to mix with what he called "the mob on the sands." However, he said he would go, if I particularly wished it. I did particularly wish it. So we went.

There were chairs on the beach. We hired two, and sat down to look about us.

All sorts of diversions were going on. Monkeys, organs, girls on stilts, a conjuror, and a troop of negro minstrels, were all at work to amuse the visitors. I thought the varied colour and bustling enjoyment of the crowd, with the bright blue sea beyond, and the glorious sunshine overhead, quite delightful—I declare I felt as if two eyes were not half enough to see with ! A nice old lady,

sitting near, entered into conversation with me ; hospitably offering me biscuits and sherry out of her own bag. Oscar, to my disappointment, looked quite disgusted with all of us. He thought my nice old lady vulgar ; and he called the company on the beach “a herd of snobs.” While he was still muttering under his breath about the “mixture of low people,” he suddenly cast a side-look at some person or thing—I could not at the moment tell which—and, rising, placed himself so as to intercept my view of the promenade on the sands immediately before me. I happened to have noticed, at the same moment, a lady approaching us in a dress of a peculiar colour ; and I pulled Oscar on one side, to look at her as she passed in front of me. “Why do you get in my way ?” I asked. Before he could answer the question the lady passed, with two lovely children, and with a tall man at her side. My eyes, looking first at the lady and the children, found their way next to the gentleman—and saw, repeated in

his face, the same black-blue complexion which had startled me in the face of Oscar's brother, when I first opened my eyes at the rectory! For the moment I felt startled again—more, as I believe, by the unexpected repetition of the blue face in the face of a stranger, than by the ugliness of the complexion itself. At any rate, I was composed enough to admire the lady's dress, and the beauty of the children, before they had passed beyond my range of view. Oscar spoke to me, while I was looking at them, in a tone of reproach for which, as I thought, there was no occasion and no excuse.

"I tried to spare you," he said. "You have yourself to thank, if that man has frightened you."

"He has *not* frightened me," I answered—sharply enough.

Oscar looked at me very attentively; and sat down again, without saying a word more.

The good-humoured old woman, on my other side, who had seen and heard all that

had passed, began to talk of the gentleman with the discoloured face, and of the lady and the children who accompanied him. He was a retired Indian officer, she said. The lady was his wife, and the two beautiful children were his own children. "It seems a pity that such a handsome man should be disfigured in that way," my new acquaintance remarked. "But still, it don't matter much, after all. There he is, as you see, with a fine woman for a wife, and with two lovely children. I know the landlady of the house where they lodge—and a happier family you couldn't lay your hand on in all England. That is my friend's account of them. Even a blue face don't seem such a dreadful misfortune, when you look at it in that light—does it, Miss?"

I entirely agreed with the old lady. Our talk seemed, for some incomprehensible reason, to irritate Oscar. He got up again impatiently, and looked at his watch.

"Your aunt will be wondering what has become of us," he said. "Surely you have

had enough of the mob on the sands, by this time?"

I had not had enough of it, and I should have been quite content to have made one of the mob for some time longer. But I saw that Oscar would be seriously vexed if I persisted in keeping my place. So I took leave of my nice old lady, and left the pleasant sands—not very willingly.

He said nothing more, until we had threaded our way out of the crowd. Then he returned, without any reason for it that I could discover, to the subject of the Indian officer, and to the remembrance which the stranger's complexion must have awakened in me of his brother's face.

"I don't understand your telling me you were not frightened when you saw that man," he said. "You were terribly frightened by my brother, when you first saw him."

"I was terribly frightened by my own imagination, *before* I saw him," I answered. "*After* I saw him, I soon got over it."

"So you say!" he rejoined.

There is something excessively provoking—at least, to me—in being told to my face that I have said something which is not worthy of belief. It was not a very becoming act on my part (after what he had told me in his letter about his brother's infatuation) to mention his brother. I ought not to have done it. I did it, for all that.

"I say what I mean," I replied. "Before I knew what you told me about your brother, I was going to propose to you, for your sake and for his, that he should live with us after we were married."

Oscar suddenly stopped. He had given me his arm to lead me through the crowd—he dropped it now.

"You say that, because you are angry with me!" he said.

I denied being angry with him; I declared once more that I was only speaking the truth.

"You really mean," he went on, "that you

could have lived comfortably with my brother's blue face before you every hour of the day?"

"Quite comfortably—if he would have been *my* brother too."

Oscar pointed to the house in which my aunt and I are living—within a few yards of the place on which we stood.

"You are close at home," he said, speaking in an odd muffled voice, with his eyes on the ground. "I want a longer walk. We shall meet at dinner-time."

He left me—without looking up, and without saying a word more.

Jealous of his brother! There is something unnatural, something degrading in such jealousy as that. I am ashamed of myself for thinking it of him. And yet what else could his conduct mean?

[*Note.*—It is for me to answer that question. Give the miserable wretch his due. His conduct meant, in one plain word—re-

morse. The only excuse left that he could make to his own conscience for the infamous part which he was playing, was this—that his brother's personal disfigurement presented a fatal obstacle in the way of his brother's marriage. And now Lucilla's own words, Lucilla's own actions, had told him that Oscar's face was no obstacle to her seeing Oscar perpetually in the familiar intercourse of domestic life. The torture of self-reproach which this discovery inflicted on him, drove him out of her presence. His own lips would have betrayed him, if he had spoken a word more to her at that moment. This is no speculation of mine. I know what I am now writing to be the truth.—P.]

It is night again. I am in my bed-room—too nervous and too anxious to go to rest yet. Let me employ myself in finishing this private record of the events of the day.

Oscar came a little before dinner-time; haggard and pale, and so absent in mind that

he hardly seemed to know what he was talking about. No explanations passed between us. He asked my pardon for the hard things he had said, and the ill-temper he had shown, earlier in the day. I readily accepted his excuses—and did my best to conceal the uneasiness which his vacant, pre-occupied manner caused me. All the time he was speaking to me, he was plainly thinking of something else—he was more unlike the Oscar of my blind remembrances than ever. It was the old voice talking in a new way: I can only describe it to myself in those terms.

As for his manner, I know it used to be always more or less quiet and retiring in the old days; but was it ever so hopelessly subdued and depressed, as I have seen it to-day? Useless to ask! In the by-gone time, I was not able to see it. My past judgment of him and my present judgment of him, have been arrived at by such totally different means, that it seems useless to compare them. Oh, how I miss Madame Pratolungo! What a relief,

what a consolation it would have been to have said all this to her, and to have heard what she thought of it in return!

There is, however, a chance of my finding my way out of some of my perplexities, at any rate—if I can only wait till to-morrow.

Oscar seems to have made up his mind at last to enter into the explanations which he has hitherto withheld from me. He has asked me to give him a private interview in the morning. The circumstances which led to his making this request have highly excited my curiosity. Something is evidently going on under the surface, in which my interests are concerned—and, possibly, Oscar's interests too.

It all came about in this way.

On returning to the house, after Oscar had left me, I found that a letter from Grosse had arrived by the afternoon post. My dear old surgeon wrote to say that he was coming to see me—and added in a postscript that he would arrive the next day at luncheon-time.

Past experience told me that this meant a demand on my aunt's housekeeping for all the good things that it could produce. (Ah, dear! I thought of Madame Pratolungo and the Mayonnaise. Will those times never come again?) Well — at dinner, I announced Grosse's visit; adding significantly, "at luncheon-time."

My aunt looked up from her plate with a little start—not interested, as I was prepared to hear, in the serious question of luncheon, but in the opinion which my medical adviser was likely to give of the state of my health.

"I am anxious to hear what Mr. Grosse says about you to-morrow," the old lady began. "I shall insist on his giving me a far more complete report of you than he gave last time. The recovery of your sight appears to me, my dear, to be quite complete."

"Do you want me to be cured, aunt, because you want to get away?" I asked. "Are you weary of Ramsgate?"

Miss Batchford's quick temper flashed at

me out of Miss Batchford's bright old eyes.

"I am weary of keeping a letter of yours," she burst out with a look of disgust.

"A letter of mine!" I exclaimed.

"Yes. A letter which is only to be given to you, when Mr. Grosse pronounces that you are quite yourself again."

Oscar—who had not taken the slightest interest in the conversation thus far—suddenly stopped, with his fork half-way to his mouth; changed colour; and looked eagerly at my aunt.

"What letter?" I asked. "Who gave it to you? Why am I not to see it until I am quite myself again?"

Miss Batchford obstinately shook her head three times, in answer to those three questions.

"I hate secrets and mysteries," she said impatiently. "This is a secret and a mystery—and I long to have done with it. That is all. I have said too much already. I shall say no more."

All my entreaties were of no avail. My aunt's quick temper had evidently led her into committing an imprudence of some sort. Having done that, she was now provokingly determined not to make bad worse. Nothing that I could say would induce her to open her lips on the subject of the mysterious letter. "Wait till Mr. Grosse comes to-morrow." That was the only reply I could get.

As for Oscar, this little incident appeared to have an effect on him which added immensely to the curiosity that my aunt had roused in me.

He listened with breathless attention while I was trying to induce Miss Batchford to answer my questions. When I gave it up, he pushed away his plate, and ate no more. On the other hand (though generally the most temperate of men) he drank a great deal of wine, both at dinner and after. In the evening, he made so many mistakes in playing cards with my aunt, that she dismissed him from the game in disgrace. He sat in a

corner for the rest of the time, pretending to listen while I was playing the piano—really lost to me and my music; buried, fathoms deep, in some uneasy thoughts of his own.

When he took his leave, he whispered these words in my ear; anxiously pressing my hand while he spoke :

“ I must see you alone to-morrow, before Grosse comes. Can you manage it ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ When ? ”

“ At the stairs on the cliff, at eleven o'clock.”

On that, he left me. But one question has pursued me ever since. Does Oscar know the writer of the mysterious letter? I firmly believe he does. To-morrow will prove whether I am right or wrong. How I long for to-morrow to come !



CHAPTER THE SIXTH.

LUCILLA'S JOURNAL, CONTINUED.

September 4th.

MARK this day as one of the saddest days of my life. Oscar has shown Madame Pratolungo to me, in her true colours. He has reasoned out this miserable matter with a plainness which it is impossible for me to resist. I have thrown away my love and my confidence on a false woman: there is no sense of honour, no feeling of gratitude or of delicacy in her nature. And I once thought her—it sickens me to recall it! I will see her no more.

[*Note.*—Did it ever occur to you to be obliged to copy out, with your own hand, this sort of opinion of your own character? I can recommend the sensation produced as something quite new, and the temptation to add a line or two on your own account to be as nearly as possible beyond mortal resistance.—P.]

Oscar and I met at the stairs, at eleven o'clock, as we had arranged.

He took me to the west pier. At that hour of the morning (excepting a few sailors who paid no heed to us) the place was a solitude. It was one of the loveliest days of the season. When we were tired of pacing to and fro, we could sit down under the mellow sunshine, and enjoy the balmy sea air. In that pure light, with all those lovely colours about us, there was something, to my mind, horribly and shamefully out of place in the talk that engrossed us—talk that still turned, hour after hour, on nothing but plots and lies, cruelty, ingratitude, and deceit!

I managed to ask my first question so as to make him enter on the subject at once—without wasting time in phrases to prepare me for what was to come.

“When my aunt mentioned that letter at dinner yesterday,” I said, “I fancied that you knew something about it. Was I right?”

“Very nearly right,” he answered. “I can’t say I knew anything about it. I only suspected that it was the production of an enemy of yours and mine.”

“Not Madame Pratolungo?”

“Yes! Madame Pratolungo.”

I disagreed with him at the outset. Madame Pratolungo and my aunt had quarrelled about politics. Any correspondence between them—a confidential correspondence especially—seemed to be one of the most unlikely things that could take place. I asked Oscar if he could guess what the letter contained, and why it was not to be given to me until Grosse reported that I was quite cured.

“ I can’t guess at the contents—I can only guess at the object of the letter,” he said.

“ What is it ?”

“ The object which she has had in view from the first—to place every possible obstacle in the way of my marrying you.”

“ What interest can she have in doing that ?”

“ My brother’s interest.”

“ Forgive me, Oscar. I cannot believe it of her.”

We were walking, while these words were passing between us. When I said that, he stopped, and looked at me very earnestly.

“ You believed it of her, when you answered my letter,” he said.

I admitted that.

“ I believed your letter,” I replied ; “ and I shared your opinion of her as long as she was in the same house with me. Her presence fed my anger and my horror of her in some way that I can’t account for. Now she has left me—now I have had time to think—there is something in her absence that pleads for

her, and tortures me with doubts if I have done right. I can't explain it—I don't understand it. I only know that so it is."

He still looked at me more and more attentively. "Your good opinion of her must have been very firmly rooted to assert itself in this obstinate manner," he said. "What can she have done to deserve it?"

If I had looked back through all my old recollections of her, and had recalled them one by one, it would only have ended in making me cry. And yet, I felt that I ought to stand up for her as long as I could. I managed to meet the difficulty in this way.

"I will tell you what she did," I said, "after I received your letter. Fortunately for me, she was not very well that morning; and she breakfasted in bed. I had plenty of time to compose myself, and to caution Zillah (who read your letter to me), before we met for the first time that day. On the previous day, I had felt hurt and offended with her for the manner in which she accounted for your

absence from Browndown. I thought she was not treating me with the same confidence which I should have placed in her, if our positions had been reversed. When I next saw her, having your warning in my mind, I made my excuses, and said what I thought she would expect me to say, under the circumstances. In my excitement and my wretchedness, I dare say I over-acted my part. At any rate, I roused the suspicion in her that something was wrong. She not only asked me if anything had happened, she went the length of saying, in so many words, that she thought she saw a change in me. I stopped it there, by declaring that I did not understand her. She must have seen that I was not telling the truth : she must have known as well as I knew that I was concealing something from her. For all that, not one word more escaped her lips. A proud delicacy—I saw it as plainly in her face, as I now see you—a proud delicacy silenced her ; she looked wounded and hurt. I have been thinking of

that look, since I have been here. I have asked myself (what did not occur to me at the time) if a false woman, who knew herself to be guilty, would have behaved in that way? Surely a false woman would have set her wits against mine, and have tried to lead me into betraying to her what discoveries I had really made? Oscar! that delicate silence, that wounded look, *will* plead for her when I think of her in her absence! I can *not* feel as satisfied as I once did, that she is the abominable creature you declare her to be. I know you are incapable of deceiving me—I know you believe what you say. But is it not possible that appearances have misled you? Can you really be sure that you have not made some dreadful mistake?"

Without answering me, he suddenly stopped at a seat under the stone parapet of the pier, and signed to me to sit down by him. I obeyed. Instead of looking at me, he kept his head turned away; looking out over the

sea. I could not make him out. He perplexed—he almost alarmed me.

“Have I offended you?” I asked.

He turned towards me again, as abruptly as he had turned away. His eyes wandered; his face was pale.

“You are a good generous creature,” he said, in a confused hasty way. “Let us talk of something else.”

“No!” I answered. “I am too deeply interested in knowing the truth to talk of anything else.”

His colour changed again at that. His face flushed; he gave a heavy sigh as one does sometimes, when one is making a great effort.

“You *will* have it?” he said.

“I *will* have it!”

He rose again. The nearer he was to telling me all that he had kept concealed from me thus far, the harder it seemed to be to him to say the first words.

“Do you mind walking on again?” he asked.

I silently rose on my side, and put my arm in his. We walked on slowly towards the end of the pier. Arrived there, he stood still, and spoke those hard first words—looking out over the broad blue waters : not looking at me.

“I won’t ask you to take anything for granted, on my assertion only,” he began. “The woman’s own words, the woman’s own actions, shall prove her guilty.”

I interrupted him by a question.

“Tell me one thing,” I said. “What first made you suspect her?”

“You first made me suspect her, by what you said of her at Browndown,” he answered. “Now carry your memory back to the time I have already mentioned in my letter—when she betrayed herself to you in the rectory garden. Is it true that she said you would have fallen in love with my brother, if you had met him first instead of me?”

“It is true that she said it,” I answered. “At a moment,” I added, “when her temper

had got the better of her—and when mine had got the better of me.”

“Advance the hour a little,” he went on, “to the time when she followed you to Browndown. Was she still out of temper, when she made her excuses to you?”

“No.”

“Did she interfere, when Nugent took advantage of your blindness to make you believe you were talking to me?”

“No.”

“Was she out of temper then?”

I still defended her. “She might well have been angry,” I said. “She had made her excuses to me in the kindest manner; and I had received them with the most unpardonable rudeness.”

My defence produced no effect on him. He summed it up coolly so far. “She compared me disadvantageously with my brother; and she allowed my brother to personate me in speaking to you, without interfering to stop it. In both these cases, her temper ex-

cuses and accounts for her conduct. Very good. We may, or may not, differ so far. Before we go farther, let us—if we can—agree on one unanswerable fact. Which of us two brothers was her favourite, from the first?”

About *that*, there could be no doubt. I admitted at once that Nugent was her favourite. And more than this, I remembered accusing her myself of never having done justice to Oscar from the first.

[*Note.*—See the sixteenth chapter of the first volume, and Madame Pratolungo's remark, warning you that you would hear of this circumstance again.—P.]

Oscar went on.

“Bear that in mind,” he said. “And now let us get to the time when we were assembled in your sitting-room, to discuss the subject of the operation on your eyes. The question before us, as I remember it, was this. Were you to marry me, before the operation? Or were you to keep me waiting until the opera-

tion had been performed, and the cure was complete? How did Madame Pratolungo decide on that occasion? She decided against my interests; she encouraged you to delay our marriage."

I persisted in defending her. "She did that out of sympathy with me," I said.

He surprised me by again accepting my view of the matter, without attempting to dispute it.

"We will say she did it out of sympathy with you," he proceeded. "Whatever her motives might be, the result was the same. My marriage to you was indefinitely put off; and Madame Pratolungo voted for that delay."

"And your brother," I added, "took the other side, and tried to persuade me to marry you first. How can you reconcile that with what you have told me——"

He interposed before I could say more. "Don't bring my brother into the inquiry," he said. "My brother, at that time, could still

behave like an honourable man, and sacrifice his own feelings to his duty to me. Let us strictly confine ourselves, for the present, to what Madame Pratolungo said and did. And let us advance again to a few minutes later on the same day, when our little domestic debate had ended. My brother was the first to go. Then, you retired, and left Madame Pratolungo and me alone in the room. Do you remember?"

I remembered perfectly.

"You had bitterly disappointed me," I said. "You had shown no sympathy with my eagerness to be restored to the blessing of sight. You made objections and started difficulties. I recollect speaking to you with some of the bitterness that I felt—blaming you for not believing in my future as I believed in it, and hoping as I hoped—and then leaving you, and locking myself up in my own room."

In those terms, I satisfied him that my memory of the events of that day was as

clear as his own. He listened without making any remark, and went on when I had done.

"Madame Pratolungo shared your 'hard opinion of me, on that occasion," he proceeded; "and expressed it in infinitely stronger terms. She betrayed herself to *you* in the rectory garden. She betrayed herself to *me*, after you had left us together in the sitting-room. Her hasty temper again, beyond all doubt! I quite agree with you. What she said to me in your absence, she would never have said if she had been mistress of herself."

I began to feel a little startled. "How is it that you now tell me of this for the first time?" I said. "Were you afraid of distressing me?"

"I was afraid of losing you," he answered.

Hitherto, I had kept my arm in his. I drew it out now. If his reply meant anything, it meant that he had once thought me capable of breaking faith with him. He saw that I was hurt.

“Remember,” he said, “that I had unhappily offended you that day, and that you have not heard yet what Madame Pratolungo had the audacity to say to me under those circumstances.”

“What did she say to you?”

“This :—‘It would have been a happier prospect for Lucilla, if she had been going to marry your brother, instead of marrying you.’ I repeat literally : those were the words.”

I could no more believe it of her than I could have believed it of myself.

“Are you really sure?” I asked him. “*Can* she have said anything so cruel to you as that?”

Instead of answering me, he took his pocket-book from the breast-pocket of his coat—searched in it—and produced a morsel of folded and crumpled paper. He opened the paper, and showed me some writing inside.

“Is that my writing?” he asked.

It was his writing. I had seen enough of his letters, since the recovery of my sight, to feel sure of that.

“Read it!” he said; “and judge for yourself.”

[*Note.*—You have made your acquaintance with this letter already, in my eighth chapter of the second volume. I had said those foolish words to Oscar (as you will find in my record of the time), under the influence of a natural indignation, which any other woman with a spark of spirit in her would have felt in my place. Instead of personally remonstrating with me, Oscar had (as usual) gone home, and written me a letter of expostulation. Having, on my side, had time to cool—and feeling the absurdity of our exchanging letters when we were within a few minutes’ walk of each other—I had gone straight to Browndown, on receiving the letter: first crumpling it up, and (as I supposed) throwing it into the fire. After personally setting my-

self right with Oscar, I had returned to the rectory ; and had there heard that Nugent had been to see me in my absence, had waited a little while alone in the sitting-room, and had gone away again. When I tell you that the letter which he was now showing to Lucilla, was that same letter of Oscar's, which I had (as I believed) destroyed, you will understand that I had thrown it into the fender instead of into the fire ; and that I failed to see it in the fender on my return, simply because Nugent had seen it first and had taken it away with him. These particulars are described in greater detail in the chapter to which I have referred ; the letter itself being there inserted at full length. However, I will save you the trouble of looking back—I know how you hate trouble !—by transcribing literally what I find before me in the Journal. The original letter is pasted on the page : I will copy it from the page for the second time. Am I not good to you ? What author by profession would do as much for you as

this? I am afraid I am praising myself!
Let Lucilla proceed.—P.]

I took the letter from him and read it. At my request, he has permitted me to keep it. The letter is my justification for thinking of Madame Pratolungo as I now think of her. I place it here, before I write another line in my Journal.

“MADAME PRATOLUNGO,—You have distressed and pained me more than I can say. There are faults, and serious ones, on my side, I know. I heartily beg your pardon for anything that I may have said or done to offend you. I cannot submit to your hard verdict on me. If you knew how I adore Lucilla, you would make allowances for me—you would understand me better than you do. I cannot get your last cruel words out of my ears. I cannot meet you again without some explanation of them. You stabbed me to the heart, when you said this evening that it

would be a happier prospect for Lucilla if she had been going to marry my brother instead of marrying me. I hope you did not really mean that? Will you please write and tell me whether you did or not.

“OSCAR.”

My first proceeding, after reading those lines, was of course to put my arm again in his, and to draw him as close to me as close could be. My second proceeding followed in due time. I asked, naturally, for Madame Pratolungo's answer to that most affectionate and most touching letter.

I have no answer to show you,” he said.

“You have lost it!” I asked.

“I never had it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Madame Pratolungo never answered my letter.”

I made him repeat that—once, twice. Was it not incredible that such an appeal could be made to any woman not utterly

depraved—and be left unnoticed? Twice he reiterated the same answer. Twice he declared on his honour that not a line of reply had been returned to him. She *was* then utterly depraved? No! there was a last excuse left that justice and friendship might still make for her. I made it.

“There is but one explanation of her conduct,” I said. “She never received the letter. Where did you send it to?”

“To the rectory.”

“Who took it?”

“My own servant.”

“He may have lost it on the way, and have been afraid to tell you. Or the servant at the rectory may have forgotten to deliver it.”

Oscar shook his head. “Quite impossible! I know Madame Pratolungo received the letter.”

“How?”

“I found it crumpled up in a corner inside the fender, *in your sitting-room at the rectory.*”

“Had it been opened?”

“It had been opened. She had received it; she had read it; and she had not thrown quite far enough to throw it into the fire. Now, Lucilla! Is Madame Pratolungo an injured woman? and am I a man who has slandered her?”

There was another public seat, a few paces distant from us. I could stand no longer. I went away by myself and sat down. A dull sensation possessed me. I could neither speak, nor cry. There I sat in silence; slowly wringing my hands in my lap, and feeling the last ties that still bound me to the once-loved friend of former days, falling away one after the other, and leaving us parted for life.

He followed me, and stood over me—he summed her up in stern quiet tones, which carried conviction into my mind, and made me feel ashamed of myself for having ever regretted her.

“Look back for the last time, Lucilla, at what this woman has said and done. You will find that the idea of your marrying

Nugent is, under one form or another, always present to her mind. Present alike when she forgets herself, and speaks in a rage—or when she reflects, and acts with a purpose. At one time, she tells you that you would have fallen in love with my brother, if you had seen him first. At another time, she stands by while my brother is personating me to you, and never interferes to stop it. On a third occasion, she sees that you are offended with me; and triumphs so cruelly in seeing it, that she tells me to my face, your prospect would have been a much happier one, if you had been engaged to marry my brother instead of me. She is asked in writing, civilly and kindly asked, to explain what she means by those abominable words? She has had time to reflect since she spoke them; and what does she do? Does she answer me? No! She contemptuously tosses my letter into the fire-place. Add to these plain facts what you yourself have observed. Nugent has all her admiration; Nugent is her favourite: from

the first, she has always disliked and wronged *me*. Add to this, again, that Nugent (as I know for certain) privately confessed to her that he was himself in love with you. Look at all these circumstances—and what plain conclusion follows? I ask you once more—Is Madame Pratolungo a slandered woman? or am I right in warning you (as you once warned me) to beware of her?”

What could I do but own that he was right? It was due to him, and due to me, to close my heart to her, from that moment. Oscar sat down by me, and took my hand.

“After my experience of her in the past,” he went on softly, “can you wonder that I dread what she may do in the future? Has no such thing ever happened as the parting of true lovers by treachery which has secretly undermined their confidence in each other? Is Madame Pratolungo not clever enough and unscrupulous enough to undermine *our* confidence, and to turn against us, to the wickedest purpose, the influence which she

already possesses at the rectory? How do we know that she is not in communication with my brother at this moment?"

I stopped him there—I could not endure it. "You have seen your brother," I said. "You have told me that you and he understand each other. What have you to dread after that?"

"I have to dread Madame Pratolungo's influence, and my brother's infatuation for you," he answered. "The promises which he has honestly made to me, are promises which I cannot depend on when my back is turned, and when Madame Pratolungo may be with him in my absence. Something under the surface is going on already! I don't like that mysterious letter, which is only to be shown to you on certain conditions. I don't like your father's silence. He has had time to answer your letter. Has he done it? He has had time to answer my post-script. Has he done it?"

Those were awkward questions. He had

certainly left both our letters unanswered—thus far. Still, the next post might bring his reply. I persisted in taking this view; and I said so to Oscar. He persisted just as obstinately on his side.

“Suppose we go on to the end of the week,” he said; “and still no letter from your father comes, for you, or for me? Will you admit, *then*, that his silence is suspicious?”

“I will admit that his silence shows a sad want of proper consideration for *you*,” I replied.

“And there you will stop? You won’t see (what I see) the influence of Madame Pratolungo making itself felt at the rectory, and poisoning your father’s mind against our marriage?”

He was pressing me rather hardly. I did my best, however, to tell him honestly what was passing in my mind.

“I can see,” I said, “that Madame Pratolungo has behaved most cruelly to you. And

I believe, after what you have told me, that she would rejoice if I broke my engagement, and married your brother. But I can *not* understand that she is mad enough to be actually plotting to make me do it. Nobody knows better than she does how faithfully I love you, and how hopeless it would be to attempt to make me marry another man. Would the stupidest woman living, who looked at you two brothers (knowing what she knows), be stupid enough to do what you suspect Madame Pratolungo of doing?"

I thought this unanswerable. He had his reply to it ready, for all that.

"If you had seen more of the world, Lucilla," he said, "you would know that a true love like yours is a mystery to a woman like Madame Pratolungo. She doesn't believe in it—she doesn't understand it. She knows herself to be capable of breaking any engagement, if the circumstances encouraged her—and she estimates your fidelity by her knowledge of her own nature. There is nothing

in her experience of you, or in her knowledge of my brother's disfigurement, to discourage such a woman from scheming to part us. She has seen for herself—what you have already told me—that you have got over your first aversion to him. She knows that women as charming as you are, have over and over again married men far more personally repulsive than my brother. Lucilla! something which is not to be out-argued, and not to be contradicted, tells me that her return to England will be fatal to my hopes, if that return finds you and me with no closer tie between us than the tie that binds us now. Are these fanciful apprehensions, unworthy of a man? My darling! worthy or not worthy, you ought to make allowances for them. They are apprehensions inspired by my love for You!"

Under those circumstances, I could make every allowance for him—and I said so. He moved nearer to me; and put his arm round me.

“Are we not engaged to each other to be man and wife?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

“Are we not both of age, and both free to do as we like?”

“Yes.”

“Would you relieve me from the anxieties under which I am suffering, if you could?”

“You know I would!”

“You *can* relieve me.”

“How?”

“By giving me a husband’s claim to you, Lucilla—by consenting to marry me in London, in a fortnight’s time.”

I started back, and looked at him in amazement. For the moment, I was incapable of answering in any other way than that.

“I ask you to do nothing unworthy of you,” he said. “I have spoken to a relative of mine living near London—a married lady—whose house is open to you in the interval before our wedding day. When your visit has been prolonged over a fortnight only, we can

be married. Write home by all means to prevent them from feeling anxious about you. Tell them that you are safe and happy, and under responsible and respectable care—but say no more. As long as it is possible for Madame Pratolungo to make mischief between us, conceal the place in which you are living. The instant we are married reveal everything. Let all your friends—let all the world know that we are man and wife!”

His arm trembled round me; his face flushed deep; his eyes devoured me. Some women, in my place, might have been offended; others might have been flattered. As for me—I can trust the secret to these pages—I was frightened.

“Is it an elopement that you are proposing to me?” I asked.

“An elopement!” he repeated. “Between two engaged people who have only themselves to think of!”

“I have my father to think of; and my aunt to think of,” I said. “You are propos-

ing to me to run away from them, and to keep in hiding from them!"

"I am asking you to pay a fortnight's visit at the house of a married lady—and to keep the knowledge of that visit from the ears of the worst enemy you have, until you have become my wife," he answered. "Is there anything so very terrible in my request that you should turn pale at it, and look at me in that frightened way? Have I not courted you with your father's consent? Am I not your promised husband? Are we not free to decide for ourselves? There is literally no reason—if it could be done—why we should not be married to-morrow. And you still hesitate? Lucilla! Lucilla! you force me to own the doubt that has made me miserable ever since I have been here. Are you indeed as changed towards me as you seem? Do you really no longer love me as you once loved me in the days that are gone?"

He rose, and walked away a few paces,

leaning over the parapet with his head in his hands.

I sat alone, not knowing what to say or do. The uneasy sense in me that he had reason to complain of my treating him coldly, was not to be dismissed from my mind by any effort that I could make. He had no right to expect me to take the step which he had proposed—there were objections to it which any woman would have felt in my place. Still, though I was satisfied of this, there was an obstinate something in me which would take his part. It could not have been my conscience surely which said to me—‘There was a time when his entreaties would have prevailed on you; there was a time when you would not have hesitated as you are hesitating now?’

Whatever the influence was, it moved me to rise from my seat, and to join him at the parapet.

“You cannot expect me to decide on such a serious matter as this at once,” I said.

“ Will you give me a little time to think?”

“ You are your own mistress,” he rejoined bitterly. “ Why ask me to give you time? You can take any time you please—you can do as you like.”

“ Give me till the end of the week,” I went on. “ Let me be sure that my father persists in not answering either your letter or mine. Though I *am* my own mistress, nothing but his silence can justify me in going away secretly, and being married to you by a stranger. Don’t press me, Oscar! It isn’t very long to the end of the week.”

Something seemed to startle him—something in my voice perhaps which told him that I was really distressed. He looked round at me quickly, and caught me with the tears in my eyes.

“ Don’t cry, for God’s sake!” he said. “ It shall be as you wish. Take your time. We will say no more about it till the end of the week.”

He kissed me in a hurried startled way, and gave me his arm to walk back.

"Grosse is coming to-day," he continued. "He mustn't see you looking as you are looking now. You must rest and compose yourself. Come home."

I went back with him, feeling—oh, so sad and sore at heart! My last faint hope of a renewal of my once-pleasant intimacy with Madame Pratolungo was at an end. She stood revealed to me now as a woman whom I ought never to have known—a woman with whom I could never again exchange a friendly word. I had lost the companion with whom I had once been so happy; and I had pained and disappointed Oscar. My life has never looked so wretched and so worthless to me as it looked to-day on the pier at Ramsgate.

He left me at the door, with a gentle encouraging pressure of my hand.

"I will call again, later," he said; "and hear what Grosse's report of you is, before he

goes back to London. Rest, Lucilla—rest and compose yourself.”

A heavy footstep sounded suddenly behind us as he spoke. We both turned round. Time had slipped by more rapidly than we had thought. There stood Herr Grosse, just arrived on foot from the railway station.

His first look at me seemed to startle and disappoint him. His eyes stared into mine through his spectacles, with an expression of surprise and anxiety which I had never seen in them before. Then he turned his head, and looked at Oscar with a sudden change — a change, unpleasantly suggestive (to my fancy) of anger or distrust. Not a word fell from his lips. Oscar was left to break the awkward silence. He spoke to Grosse.

“I won’t disturb you and your patient now,” he said. “I will come back in an hour’s time.”

“No! you will come in along with me, if you please. I have something, my young

gentlemen, that I may want to say to you." He spoke with a frown on his bushy eyebrows, and pointed in a very peremptory manner to the house-door.

Oscar rang the bell. At the same moment my aunt, hearing us outside, appeared on the balcony above the door.

"Good morning, Mr. Grosse," she said. "I hope you find Lucilla looking her best. Only yesterday, I expressed my opinion that she was quite well again."

Grosse took off his hat sulkily to my aunt, and looked back again at me—looked so hard and so long, that he began to confuse me.

"Your aunt's opinions is not my opinions," he growled, close at my ear. "I don't like the looks of you, Miss. Go in!"

The servant was waiting for us at the open door. I went in without making any answer. Grosse waited to see Oscar enter the house before him. Oscar's face darkened as he joined me in the hall. He looked half angry,

half confused. Grosse pushed himself roughly between us, and gave me his arm. I went up-stairs with him, wondering what it all meant.





CHAPTER THE SEVENTH.

LUCILLA'S JOURNAL, CONCLUDED.

September 4th (continued).

ARRIVED in the drawing-room, Grosse placed me in a chair near the window. He leaned forward, and looked at me close ; he drew back, and looked at me from a distance ; he took out his magnifying glass, and had a long stare through it at my eyes ; he felt my pulse ; dropped my wrist as if it disgusted him ; and, turning to the window, looked out in grim silence, without taking the slightest notice of any one in the room.

My aunt was the first person who spoke, under these discouraging circumstances.

"Mr. Grosse!" she said sharply. "Have you nothing to tell me about your patient to-day? Do you find Lucilla——"

He turned suddenly round from the window, and interrupted Miss Batchford without the slightest ceremony.

"I find her gone back, back, back!" he growled, getting louder and louder at each repetition of the word. "When I sent her here, I said—'Keep her comfortable-easy.' You have *not* kept her comfortable-easy. Something has turned her poor little mind topsy-turvies. What is it? Who is it?" He looked fiercely backwards and forwards between Oscar and my aunt—then turned my way, and, putting his heavy hands on my shoulders, looked down at me with an odd angry kind of pity in his face. "My child is melancholick; my child is ill," he went on. "Where is our goot-dear Pratolungo? What did you tell me about her, my little-lofe, when I last saw you? You said she had gone aways to see her Papa. Send

a telegrams — and say I want Pratolungo here.”

At the repetition of Madame Pratolungo's name, Miss Batchford rose to her feet, and stood (apparently) several inches higher than usual.

“Am I to understand, sir,” inquired the old lady, “that your extraordinary language is intended to cast a reproach on my conduct towards my niece?”

“You are to understand this, madam. In the face of the goot sea-air, Miss your niece is fretting herself ill. I sent her to this place, for to get a rosy face, for to put on a firm flesh. How do I find her? She has got nothing, she has put on nothing—she is emphatically flabby-pale. In this fine airs, she can be flabby-pale but for one reason. She is fretting herself about something or anoder. Is fretting herself goot for her eyes? Ho-damn-damn! it is as bad for her eyes as bad can be. If you can do no better than this, take her aways back again. You

are wasting your moneys in this lodgment here."

My aunt addressed herself to me in her grandest manner.

"You will understand, Lucilla, that it is impossible for me to notice such language as this in any other way than by leaving the room. If you can bring Mr. Grosse to his senses, inform him that I will receive his apologies and explanations in writing." Pronouncing these lofty words with her severest emphasis, Miss Batchford rose another inch, and sailed majestically out of the room.

Grosse took no notice of the offended lady : he only put his hands in his pockets, and looked out of window once more. As the door closed, Oscar left the corner in which he had seated himself, not over-graciously, when we entered the room.

"Am I wanted here?" he asked.

Grosse was on the point of answering the question even less amiably than it had been put—when I stopped him by a look. "I

want to speak to you," I whispered in his ear. He nodded, and, turning sharply to Oscar, put this question to him :

"Are you living in the house?"

"I am staying at the hotel at the corner."

"Go to the hotel, and wait there till I come to you."

Greatly to my surprise, Oscar submitted to be treated in this peremptory manner. He took his leave of me silently, and left the room. Grosse drew a chair close to mine, and sat down by me in a comforting confidential fatherly way.

"Now, my goot-girls," he said. "What have you been fretting yourself about since I was last in this house? Open it all, if you please, to Papa Grosse. Come-begin-begin!"

I suppose he had exhausted his ill-temper on my aunt and Oscar. He said those words—more than kindly—almost tenderly. His fierce eyes seemed to soften behind his spectacles: he took my hand and patted it to encourage me.

There are some things written in these pages of mine which it was, of course, impossible for me to confide to him. With those necessary reservations—and without entering on the painful subject of my altered relations with Madame Pratolungo—I owned quite frankly how sadly changed I felt myself to be towards Oscar, and how much less happy I was with him, in consequence of the change. “I am not ill as you suppose,” I explained. “I am only disappointed in myself, and a little downhearted when I think of the future.” Having opened it to him in this way, I thought it time to put the question which I had determined to ask when I next saw him.

“The restoration of my sight,” I said, “has made a new being of me. In gaining the sense of seeing, have I lost the sense of feeling which I had when I was blind? I want to know if it will come back when I have got used to the novelty of my position? I want to know if I shall ever enjoy Oscar’s society again, as I used to enjoy it in the old days

before you cured me—the happy days, Papa-Grosse, when I was an object of pity, and when all the people spoke of me as Poor Miss Finch?”

I had more to say—but at this place, Grosse (without meaning it, I am sure) suddenly stopped me. To my amazement, he let go of my hand, and turned his face away sharply, as if he resented my looking at him. His big head sank on his breast. He lifted his great hairy hands, shook them mournfully, and let them fall on his knees. This strange behaviour and the still stranger silence which accompanied it, made me so uneasy that I insisted on his explaining himself. “What is the matter with you?” I said. “Why don’t you answer me?”

He roused himself with a start, and put his arm round me, with a wonderful gentleness for a man who was so rough at other times.

“It is nothing, my pretty love,” he said. “I am out of sort, as you call it. Your English climates sometimes gives your English blue

devil to foreign mens like me. I have got him now—an English blue devil in a German inside. Soh! I shall go and walk him out, and come back empty-cheerful, and see you again.” He rose, after this curious explanation, and attempted some sort of answer—a very odd one—to the question which I had asked of him. “As to that odder thing,” he went on, “yes-indeed-yes. You have hit your nail on his head. It is, as you say, your seeings which has got in the way of your feelings. When your seeings-feelings has got used to one anodder, your seeings will stay where he is, your feelings will come back to where they was; one will balance the odder; you will feel as you did; you will see as you didn’t, all at the same times, all jolly-nice again as before. You have my opinions. Now let me walk out my blue devil. I swear to come back again with a new inside. By-bye-my-Feench-good-bye.”

Saying all this in a violent hurry, as if he was eager to get away, he gave me a kiss on

the forehead, snatched up his shabby hat, and ran out of the room.

What did it mean?

Does he persist in thinking me seriously ill? I am too weary to puzzle my brains in the effort to understand my dear old surgeon. It is one o'clock in the morning; and I have still to write the story of all that happened later in the day. My eyes are beginning to ache; and, strange to say, I have hardly been able to see the last two or three lines I have written. They look as if the ink was fading from them. If Grosse knew what I am about at this moment! His last words to me, when he went back to his patients in London, were:—"No more readings! no more writings till I come again!" It is all very well to talk in that way. I have got so used to my Journal that I can't do without it. Nevertheless, I must stop now—for the best of reasons. Though I have got three lighted candles on my table, I really cannot see to write any more.

To bed ! to bed !

[*Note.*—I have purposely abstained from interrupting Lucilla's Journal, until my extracts from it had reached this place. Here the writer pauses, and gives me a chance ; and here there are matters that must be mentioned, of which she had personally no knowledge at the time.

You have seen how her faithful instinct still tries to reveal to my poor darling the cruel deception that is being practised on her—and still tries in vain. In spite of herself, she shrinks from the man who is tempting her to go away with him—though he pleads in the character of her betrothed husband. In spite of herself, she detects the weak places in the case which Nugent has made out against me—the absence of sufficient motive for the conduct of which he accuses me, and the utter improbability of my plotting and intriguing (without anything to gain by it) to make her marry the man who was not

the man of her choice. She feels these hesitations and difficulties. But what they really signify it is morally impossible for her to guess.

Thus far, no doubt, her strange and touching position has been plainly revealed to you. But can I feel quite so sure that you understand how seriously she has been affected by the anxiety, disappointment, and suspense which have combined together to torture her at this critical interval in her life ?

I doubt it, for the sufficient reason that you have only had her Journal to enlighten you, and that her Journal shows she does not understand it herself. As things are, it seems to be time for me to step on the stage, and to discover to you plainly what her surgeon really thought of her, by telling you what passed between Grosse and Nugent, when the German presented himself at the hotel.

I am writing now (as a matter of course) from information given to me, at an after-period, by the persons themselves. As to

particulars, the accounts vary. As to results, they both agree.

The discovery that Nugent was at Ramsgate necessarily took Grosse by surprise. With his previous knowledge, however, of the situation of affairs at Dimchurch, he could be at no loss to understand in what character Nugent had presented himself to Lucilla ; and he could certainly not fail to understand—after what he had seen and what she had herself told him—that the deception was, under present circumstances, producing the worst possible effect on her mind. Arriving at this conclusion, he was not a man to hesitate about the duty that lay before him. When he entered the room at the hotel in which Nugent was waiting for him, he announced the object of his visit in these four plain words, as follows :

“ Pack up, and go ! ”

Nugent coolly offered him a chair, and asked what he meant.

Grosse refused the chair—but consented to

explain himself in terms variously reported by the two parties. Combining the statements, and translating Grosse (in this grave matter) into plain English, I find that the German must have expressed himself in these, or nearly in these, words :

“ As a professional man, Mr. Nugent, I invariably refuse to enter into domestic considerations connected with my patients with which I have nothing to do. In the case of Miss Finch, my business is not with your family complications. My business is to secure the recovery of the young lady's sight. If I find her health improving, I don't inquire how or why. No matter what private and personal frauds you may be practising upon her, I have nothing to say to them—more, I am ready to take advantage of them myself—so long as their influence is directly beneficial in keeping her morally and physically in the condition in which I wish her to be. But, the instant I discover that this domestic conspiracy of yours—this persona-

tion of your brother which once quieted and comforted her—is unfavourably affecting her health of body and her peace of mind, I interfere between you in the character of her medical attendant, and stop it on medical grounds. You are producing in my patient a conflict of feeling, which—in a nervous temperament like hers—cannot go on without serious injury to her health. And serious injury to her health means serious injury to her eyes. I won't have that—I tell you plainly to pack up and go. I meddle with nothing else. After what you have yourself seen, I leave you to decide whether you will restore your brother to Miss Finch, or not. All I say is, Go. Make any excuse you like, but go before you have done more mischief. You shake your head! Is that a sign that you refuse? Take a day to think, before you make up your mind. I have patients in London to whom I am obliged to go back. But the day after to-morrow, I shall return to Ramsgate. If I find you still here, I shall

tell Miss Finch you are no more Oscar Dubourg than I am. In her present state, I see less danger in giving her even that serious shock than in leaving her to the slow torment of mind which you are inflicting by your continued presence in this place. My last word is said. I go back by the next train, in an hour's time. Good morning, Mr. Nugent. If you are a wise man, you will meet me at the station."

After this, the accounts vary. Nugent's statement asserts that he accompanied Grosse on his way back to Miss Batchford's lodging, arguing the matter with him, and only leaving him at the door of the house. Grosse's statement, on the other hand, makes no allusion to this. The disagreement between them is, however, of no consequence here. It is admitted, on either side, that the result of the interview was the same. When Grosse took the train for London, Nugent Dubourg was not at the station. The next entry in the *Journal* shows that he remained that day and night, at least, at Ramsgate.

You now know, from the narrative of the surgeon's own proceedings, how seriously he thought of his patient's case, and how firmly he did his duty as an honourable man. Having given you this necessary information, I again retire, and leave Lucilla to take up the next link in the chain of events.—P.]

September 5th. Six o'clock in the morning.
—A few hours of restless, broken sleep—disturbed by horrid dreams, and waking over and over again with startings that seemed to shake me from head to foot. I can bear it no longer. The sun is rising. I have got up—and here I am at the writing-table, trying to finish the long story of yesterday still uncompleted in my Journal.

I have just been looking at the view from my window—and I notice one thing which has struck me. The mist this morning is the thickest mist I have yet seen here.

The sea-view is almost invisible, it is so dim and dull. Even the objects about me in

my room are nothing like so plain as usual. The mist is stealing in no doubt through my open window. It gets between me and my paper, and obliges me to bend down close over the page to see what I am about. When the sun is higher, things will be clear again. In the meantime, I must do as well as I can.

Grosse came back, after his walk, as mysterious as ever.

He was quite peremptory in ordering me not to overtask my eyes—forbidding reading and writing, as I have already mentioned. But, when I asked for his reasons, he had, for the first time in my experience of him, no reasons to give. I have the less scruple about disobeying him, on that account. Still I am a little uneasy, I confess, when I think of his strange behaviour yesterday. He looked at me, in the oddest way—as if he saw something in my face which he had never seen before. Twice he took his leave; and twice he returned, doubtful whether he would

not remain at Ramsgate, and let his patients in London take care of themselves. His extraordinary indecision was put an end to at last by the arrival of a telegram which had followed him from London. An urgent message, I suppose, from one of the patients. He went away in a bad temper and a violent hurry; and told me, at the door, to expect him back on the sixth.

When Oscar came later, there was another surprise for me.

Like Grosse, he was not himself—he too behaved strangely! First, he was so cold and so silent, that I thought he was offended. Then he went straight to the other extreme, and became so loudly talkative, so obstreperously cheerful, that my aunt asked me privately whether I did not suspect (as she did) that he had been taking too much wine. It ended in his trying to sing to my accompaniment on the piano, and in his breaking down. He walked away to the other end of the room without explanation or apology.

When I followed him there a little while after, he had a look that indescribably distressed me—a look as if he had been crying. Towards the end of the evening, my aunt fell asleep over her book, and gave us a chance of speaking to each other in a little second room which opens out of the drawing-room in this house. It was I who took the chance—not he. He was so incomprehensibly unwilling to go into the room and speak to me, that I had to do a very unladylike thing. I mean that I had to take his arm, and lead him in myself, and entreat him (in a whisper) to tell me what was the matter with him.

“Only the old complaint,” he answered.

I made him sit down by me on a little couch that just held two.

“What do you mean by the old complaint?” I asked.

“Oh! you know!”

“I *don't* know.”

“You would know if you really loved me.”

“Oscar! it is a shame to say that. It is a shame to doubt that I love you!”

“Is it? Ever since I have been here, I have doubted that you love me. It is getting to be an old complaint of mine now. I still suffer a little sometimes. Don’t notice it!”

He was so cruel and so unjust, that I got up to leave him, without saying a word more. But, oh! he looked so forlorn and so submissive—sitting with his head down, and his hands crossed listlessly over his knees—that I could not find it in my heart to treat him harshly. Was I wrong? I don’t know! I have no idea how to manage men—and no Madame Pratolungo now to teach me. Right or wrong, it ended in my sitting down by him again in the place which I had just left.

“You ought to beg my pardon,” I said, “for thinking of me as you think, and talking to me as you talk.”

“I do beg your pardon,” he answered humbly. “I am sorry if I have offended you.”

How could I resist that? I put my hand

on his shoulder, and tried to make him lift up his head and look at me.

"You will always believe in me in the future?" I went on. "Promise me that."

"I can promise to try, Lucilla. As things are now, I can promise no more."

"As things are now? You are speaking in riddles to-night. Explain yourself."

"I explained myself this morning on the pier."

Surely, this was hard on me—after he had promised to give me till the end of the week to consider his proposal? I took my hand off his shoulder. He—who never used to displease or disappoint me when I was blind—had displeased and disappointed me for the second time in a few minutes!

"Do you wish to force me?" I asked. "after telling me this morning that you would give me time to reflect?"

He rose, on his side—languidly and mechanically, like a man who neither knew nor cared what he was doing.

“Force you?” he repeated. “Did I say that? I don’t know what I am talking about; I don’t know what I am doing. You are right and I am wrong. I am a miserable wretch, Lucilla—I am utterly unworthy of you. It would be better for you if you never saw me again!” He paused; and taking me by both hands, looked earnestly and sadly into my face. “Good night, my dear!” he said—and suddenly dropped my hands, and turned away to go out.

I stopped him. “Going already?” I said. “It is not late yet.”

“It is best for me to go.”

“Why?”

“I am in wretched spirits. It is better for me to be by myself.”

“Don’t say that! It sounds like a reproach to *me*.”

“On the contrary, it is all my fault. Good night!”

I refused to say good night—I refused to let him go. His wanting to go was in itself a

reproach to me. He had never done it before. I asked him to sit down again.

He shook his head.

“For ten minutes!”

He shook his head again.

“For five minutes!”

Instead of answering, he gently lifted a long lock of my hair, which hung at the side of my neck. (My head, I should add, had been dressed that evening on the old-fashioned plan, by my aunt's maid—to please my aunt.)

“If I stay for five minutes longer,” he said, “I shall ask for something.”

“For what?”

“You have beautiful hair, Lucilla.”

“You can't want a lock of my hair, surely?”

“Why not?”

“I gave you a keepsake of that sort—ages ago. Have you forgotten it?” (*Note.*—The keepsake had of course been given to the true Oscar, and was then, as it is now, still in his possession. Notice, when he recovers himself, how quickly the false Oscar infers this,

and how cleverly he founds his excuse upon it.—P.)

His face flushed deep ; his eyes dropped before mine. I could see that he was ashamed of himself—I could only conclude that he *had* forgotten it ! A morsel of *his* hair was, at that moment, in a locket which I wore round my neck. I had more reason, I think, to doubt him than he had to doubt me. I was so mortified, that I stepped aside, and made way for him to go out.

“ You wish to go away,” I said ; “ I won’t keep you any longer.”

It was his turn now to plead with *me*.

“ Suppose I have been deprived of your keepsake ?” he said. “ Suppose somebody whom I would rather not mention, has taken it away from me ?”

I instantly understood him. His miserable brother had taken it. My work-basket was close by. I cut off a lock of my hair, and tied it at each end with a morsel of my favourite light-blue ribbon.

"Are we friends again, Oscar?" was all I said as I put it into his hand.

He caught me in his arms in a kind of frenzy—holding me to him so violently that he hurt me ; kissing me so fiercely that he frightened me. Before I had recovered breath enough to speak to him, he had released me, and had gone out in such headlong haste that he knocked down a little round table with books on it, and woke my aunt.

The old lady called for me in her most formidable voice, and showed me the family temper in its sourest aspect. Grosse had gone back to London without making any apology to her ; and Oscar had knocked down her books. The indignation aroused by these two outrages called loudly for a victim—and (no one else being near at the moment) selected Me. Miss Batchford discovered for the first time that she had undertaken too much in assuming the sole charge of her niece at Ramsgate.

"I decline to accept the entire responsi-

bility," said my aunt. "At my age, the entire responsibility is too much for me. I shall write to your father, Lucilla. I always did, and always shall, detest him, as you know. His views on politics and religion are (in a clergyman) simply detestable. Still he *is* your father ; and it is a duty on my part, after what that rude foreigner has said about your health, to offer to restore you to your father's roof—or, at least, to obtain your father's sanction to your continuing to remain under my care. This course, in either case you will observe, relieves me from the entire responsibility. I am doing nothing to compromise my position. My position is quite plain to me. I should have formally accepted your father's hospitality on the occasion of your wedding—if I had been well enough and if the wedding had taken place. It follows as a matter of course that I may formally report to your father what the medical opinion is of your health. However brutally it may have been given, it *is* a medical

opinion—and as such I am bound to communicate it.”

Knowing but too well how bitterly my aunt's aversion to him is reciprocated by my father, I did my best to combat Miss Batchford's resolution — without making matters worse by telling her what my motives really were. With some difficulty I prevailed on her to defer the proposed report of me for a day or two—and we parted for the night (the old lady's fits of temper are soon over) as good friends as usual.

This little episode in the history of the evening diverted my mind for the time from Oscar's strange conduct yesterday evening. But once up here by myself in my own room, I have been thinking of it, or dreaming of it (such horrid dreams—I cannot write them down !) almost incessantly from that time to this. When we meet again to-day—how will he look ? what will he say ?

He was right yesterday. I *am* cold to him ; there *is* some change in me towards him, which

I don't understand myself. My conscience accuses me, now I am alone—and yet, God knows, it is not my fault. Poor Oscar! Poor me!

I have never longed to see him—since we met at this place—as I long now. He sometimes comes to breakfast. Will he come to breakfast to-day?

Oh, how my eyes ache! and how obstinately the mist stops in the room! Suppose I close the window, and go back to bed again for a little while?

Nine o'clock.—The maid came in half an hour since, and woke me. She went to open the window as usual. I stopped her.

“Is the mist gone?” I asked.

The girl stared. “What mist, Miss?”

“Haven't you seen it?”

“No, Miss.”

“What time did you get up?”

“At seven, Miss.”

At seven I was still writing in my Journal,

and the mist was still over everything in the room. Persons in the lower ranks of life are curiously unobservant of the aspects of Nature. I never (in the days of my blindness) got any information from servants or labourers about the views round Dimchurch. They seemed to have no eyes for anything beyond the range of the kitchen, or the ploughed field. I got out of bed, and took the maid myself to the window, and opened it.

"There!" I said. "It is not quite so thick as it was some hours since. But there is the mist as plain as can be!"

The girl looked backwards and forwards in a state of bewilderment between me and the view.

"Mist?" she repeated. "Begging your pardon, Miss, it's a beautiful clear morning—as I see it."

"Clear?" I repeated on my side.

"Yes, Miss!"

"Do you mean to tell me it's clear over the sea?"

“The sea is a beautiful blue, Miss. Far and near, you can see the ships.”

“Where are the ships?”

She pointed, out of the window, to a certain spot.

“There are two of them, Miss. A big ship, with three masts. And a little ship just behind, with one.”

I looked along her finger, and strained my eyes to see. All I could make out was a dim greyish mist, with something like a little spot or blur on it, at the place which the maid's finger indicated as the position occupied by the two ships.

The idea struck me for the first time that the dimness which I had attributed to the mist, was, in plain truth, the dimness in my own eyes. For the moment, I was a little startled. I left the window, and made the best excuse that I could to the girl. As soon as it was possible to dismiss her, I sent her away, and bathed my eyes with one of Grosse's lotions, and then tried them again in writing

this entry. To my relief, I can see to write better than I did earlier in the morning. Still, I have had a warning to pay a little more attention to Grosse's directions than I have hitherto done. Is it possible that he saw something in the state of my eyes which he was afraid to tell me of? Nonsense! Grosse is not the sort of man who shrinks from speaking out. I have fatigued my eyes—that is all. Let me shut up my book, and go down-stairs to breakfast.

Ten o'clock.—For a moment, I open my Journal again.

Something has happened which I must positively set down in this history of my life. I am so vexed and so angry! The maid (wretched chattering fool!) has told my aunt what passed between us this morning at my window. Miss Batchford has taken the alarm, and has insisted on writing, not only to Grosse, but to my father. In the present embittered state of my father's feeling against my aunt, he will either leave her letter unanswered, or

he will offend her by an angry reply. In either case, I shall be the sufferer : my aunt's sense of injury—which cannot address itself to my father—will find a convenient object to assail in *me*. I shall never hear the last of it. Being already nervous and dispirited, the prospect of finding myself involved in a new family quarrel quite daunts me. I feel ungratefully inclined to run away from Miss Batchford, when I think of it!

No signs of Oscar ; and no news of Oscar—yet.

Twelve o'clock.—But one trial more was wanted to make my life here quite unendurable. The trial has come.

A letter from Oscar (sent by messenger from his hotel) has just been placed in my hands. It informs me that he has decided on leaving Ramsgate by the next train. The next train starts in forty minutes. Good God ! what am I to do ?

My eyes are burning. I know it does them harm to cry. How can I help crying ?

It is all over between us, if I let Oscar go away alone—his letter as good as tells me so. Oh, why have I behaved so coldly to him? I ought to make any sacrifice of my own feelings to atone for it. And yet, there is an obstinate something in me that shrinks—What am I to do? what am I to do?

I must drop the pen, and try if I can think. My eyes completely fail me. I can write no more.

[*Note.*—I copy the letter to which Lucilla refers.

Nugent's own assertion is, that he wrote it in a moment of remorse, to give her an opportunity of breaking the engagement by which she innocently supposed herself to be held to him. He declares that he honestly believed the letter would offend her, when he wrote it. The other interpretation of the document is, that finding himself obliged to leave Rams-gate—under penalty (if he remained) of being exposed by Grosse as an impostor, when the

surgeon visited his patient on the next day—Nugent seized the opportunity of making his absence the means of working on Lucilla's feelings, so as to persuade her to accompany him to London. Don't ask me which of these two conclusions I favour. For reasons which you will understand when you have come to the end of my narrative, I would rather not express my opinion, either one way or the other.

Read the letter—and determine for yourselves :—

“MY DARLING,—After a sleepless night, I have decided on leaving Ramsgate, by the next train that starts after you receive these lines. Last night's experience has satisfied me that my presence here (after what I said to you on the pier) only distresses you. Some influence that is too strong for you to resist has changed your heart towards me. When the time comes for you to determine whether you will be my wife on the condi-

tions that I have proposed, I see but too plainly that you will say No. Let me make it less hard for you, my love, to do that, by leaving you to write the word—instead of saying it to me. If you wish for your freedom, cost me what it may, I will absolve you from your engagement. I love you too dearly to blame you. My address in London is on the other leaf. Farewell !

“ OSCAR.”

The address given on the blank leaf is at an hotel.

A few lines more in the Journal, follow the lines last quoted in this place. Except a word or two, here and there, it is impossible any longer to decipher the writing. The mischief done to her eyes by her reckless use of them, by her fits of crying, by her disturbed nights, by the long-continued strain on her of agitation and suspense, has evidently justified the worst of those unacknowledged forebodings which Grosse felt when he saw her.

The last lines of the Journal are, as writing, actually inferior to her worst writing in the days when she was blind.

However, the course which she ended in taking on receipt of the letter which you have just read, is sufficiently indicated by a note of Nugent's writing, left at Miss Batchford's residence at Ramsgate by a porter from the railway. After-events make it necessary to preserve this note also. It runs thus :—

“MADAM,—I write, by Lucilla's wish, to beg that you will not be anxious on discovering that your niece has left Ramsgate. She accompanies me, at my express request, to the house of a married lady who is a relative of mine, and under whose care she will remain, until the time arrives for our marriage. The reasons which have led to her taking this step, and which oblige her to keep her new place of residence concealed for the present, will be frankly stated to you and to her

father on the day when we are man and wife. In the meantime, Lucilla begs that you will excuse her abrupt departure, and that you will be so good as to send this letter on to her father. Both you and he will, I hope, remember that she is of an age to act for herself, and that she is only hastening her marriage with a man to whom she has been long engaged, with the sanction and approval of her family. — Believe me, Madam, your faithful Servant,
“OSCAR DUBOURG.”

This letter was delivered at luncheon-time —almost at the moment when the servant had announced to her mistress that Miss Finch was nowhere to be found, and that her travelling-bag had disappeared from her room. The London train had then started. Miss Batchford, having no right to interfere, decided—after consultation with a friend—on at once travelling to Dimchurch, and placing the matter in Mr. Finch's hands.—P.]



CHAPTER THE EIGHTH.

THE ITALIAN STEAMER.

LUCILLA'S Journal has told you all that Lucilla can tell. Permit me to reappear in these pages. Shall

I say, with your favourite English clown, reappearing every year in your barbarous English pantomime, "Here I am again : how do you do ?" No—I had better leave that out. Your clown is one of your national institutions. With this mysterious source of British amusement let no foreign person presume to trifle.

I arrived at Marseilles, as well as I can remember, on the fifteenth of August.

You cannot be expected to feel any interest

in good Papa. I will pass over this venerable victim of the amiable delusions of the heart, as rapidly as respect and affection will permit. The duel (I hope you remember the duel ?) had been fought with pistols ; and the bullet had not been extracted when I joined my sisters at the sufferer's bedside. He was delirious and did not know me. Two days later, the removal of the bullet was accomplished by the surgeon in attendance. For a time, he improved after this. Then there was a relapse. It was only on the first of September that we were permitted to hope he might still be spared to us.

On that date, I was composed enough to think again of Lucilla, and to remember Mrs. Finch's polite request to me that I would write to her from Marseilles.

I wrote briefly, telling the damp lady of the rectory (only at greater length) what I have told here. My main motive in doing this was, I confess, to obtain, through Mrs. Finch, some news of Lucilla. After posting

the letter, I attended to another duty which I had neglected while my father was in danger of death. I went to the person to whom my lawyer had recommended me, to institute that search for Oscar which I had determined to set on foot when I left London. The person was connected with the police, in the capacity (as nearly as I can express it in English) of a sort of private superintendent—not officially recognised, but secretly trusted for all that.

When he heard of the time that had elapsed without any discovery of the slightest trace of the fugitive, he looked grave; and declared, honestly enough, that he doubted if he could reward my confidence in him by proving himself to be of the slightest service to me. Seeing, however, that I was earnestly bent on making some sort of effort, he put a last question to me in these terms:—

“You have not described the gentleman yet. Is there, by lucky chance, anything remarkable in his personal appearance?”

“There is something very remarkable, sir,”
I answered.

“Describe it exactly, ma’am, if you please.”

I described Oscar’s complexion. My excellent superintendent showed encouraging signs of interest as he listened. He was a most elegantly-dressed gentleman, with the gracious manners of a prince. It was quite a privilege to be allowed to talk to him.

“If the missing man has passed through France,” he said, “with such a remarkable face as that, there is a fair chance of finding him. I will set preliminary inquiries going at the railway station, at the steam-packet office, and at the port. You shall hear the result to-morrow.”

I went back to good Papa’s bedside—satisfied, so far.

The next day, my superintendent honoured me by a visit.

“Any news, sir?” I asked.

“News already, ma’am. The clerk at the steam packet office perfectly well remembers

selling a ticket to a stranger with a terrible blue face. Unhappily, his memory is not equally good, as to other matters. He cannot accurately call to mind, either the name of the stranger, or the place for which the stranger embarked. We know that he must either have gone to some port in Italy, or to some port in the East. And, thus far, we know no more."

"What are we to do next?" I enquired.

"I propose—with your permission—sending personal descriptions of the gentleman, by telegraph, to the different ports in Italy first. If nothing is heard of him in reply, we will try the ports in the East next. That is the course which I have the honour of submitting to your consideration. Do you approve of it?"

I cordially approved of it; and waited for the results with all the patience that I could command.

The next day passed, and nothing happened. My unhappy father got on very

slowly. The vile woman who had caused the disaster (and who had run off with his antagonist) was perpetually in his mind ; disturbing him and keeping him back. Why is a destroying wretch of this sort, a pitiless, treacherous, devouring monster in female form, allowed to be out of prison ? You shut up in a cage a poor tigress, who only eats you when she is hungry, and can't provide for her dear little children in any other way—and you let the other and far more dangerous beast of the two range at large under protection of the law ! Ah, it is easy to see that the men make the laws. Never mind. The women are coming to the front. Wait a little. The tigresses on two legs will have a bad time of it when *we* get into Parliament.

On the fourth of the month, the superintendent wrote to me. More news of the lost Oscar already !

The blue man had disembarked at Genoa ; and had been traced to the station of the railway running to Turin. More inquiries had

been, thereupon, sent by telegraph to Turin. In the meantime, and in the possible event of the missing person returning to England by way of Marseilles, experienced men, provided with a personal description of him, would be posted at various public places, to pass in review all travellers arriving either by land or sea—and to report to me, if the right traveller appeared. Once more, my princely superintendent submitted this course to my consideration—and waited for my approval—and got it, with my admiration thrown in as part of the bargain.

The days passed—and good Papa still vacillated between better and worse.

My sisters broke down, poor souls, under their anxieties. It all fell as usual on my shoulders. Day by day, my prospect of returning to England seemed to grow more and more remote. Not a line of reply reached me from Mrs. Finch. This in itself fidgetted and disturbed me. Lucilla was now hardly ever out of my thoughts. Over and over

again, my anxiety urged me to run the risk, and write to her. But the same obstacle always raised itself in my way. After what had happened between us, it was impossible for me to write to her directly, without first restoring myself to my former place in her estimation. And I could only do this, by entering into particulars which, for all I knew to the contrary, it might still be cruel and dangerous to reveal.

As for writing to Miss Batchford, I had already tried the old lady's patience in that way, before leaving England. If I tried it again, with no better excuse for a second intrusion than my own anxieties might suggest, the chances were that this uncompromising royalist would throw my letter in the fire, and treat her republican correspondent with contemptuous silence. Grosse was the third, and last, person from whom I might hope to obtain information. But—shall I confess it?—I did not know what Lucilla might have told him of the estrangement between us;

and my pride (remember, if you please, that I am a poverty-stricken foreigner) revolted at the idea of exposing myself to a possible repulse.

However, by the eleventh of the month, I began to feel my suspense so keenly, and to suffer under such painful doubts of what Nugent might be doing in my absence, that I resolved at all hazards on writing to Grosse. It was at least possible, as I calculated—and the Journal will show you I calculated right—that Lucilla had only told him of my melancholy errand at Marseilles, and had mentioned nothing more. I had just opened my desk—when our doctor in attendance entered the room, and announced the joyful intelligence that he could answer at last for the recovery of good Papa.

“Can I go back to England?” I asked eagerly.

“Not immediately. You are his favourite nurse—you must gradually accustom him to the idea of your going away. If

you do anything sudden you may cause a relapse."

"I will do nothing sudden. Only tell me, when it will be safe—absolutely safe—for me to go?"

"Say, in a week."

"On the eighteenth?"

"On the eighteenth."

I shut up my writing-desk. Within a few days I might now hope to be in England as soon as I could receive Grosse's answer at Marseilles. Under these circumstances, it would be better to wait until I could make my inquiries, safely and independently, in my own proper person. Comparison of dates will show that if I *had* written to the German oculist, it would have been too late. It was now the eleventh; and Lucilla had left Ramsgate with Nugent on the fifth.

All this time but one small morsel of news rewarded our inquiries after Oscar—and even that small morsel seemed to me to be unworthy of belief.

It was said that he had been seen at a military hospital—the hospital of Alessandria, in Piedmont, I think—acting, under the surgeons, as attendant on the badly-wounded men who had survived the famous campaign of France and Italy against Austria. (Bear in mind, if you please, that I am writing of the year eighteen hundred and fifty-nine, and that the peace of Villafranca was only signed in the July of that year.) Occupation as hospital-man-nurse was, to my mind, occupation so utterly at variance with Oscar's temperament and character, that I persisted in considering the intelligence thus received of him to be on the face of it false.

On the seventeenth of the month, I had got my passport regulated, and had packed up the greater part of my baggage in anticipation of my journey back to England on the next day.

Carefully as I had tried to accustom his mind to the idea, my poor father remained so immovably reluctant to let me leave him, that I was obliged to consent to a sort of compro-

mise. I promised, when the business which took me to England was settled, to return again to Marseilles, and to travel back with him to his home in Paris, as soon as he was fit to be moved. On this condition, I gained permission to go. Poor as I was, I infinitely preferred charging my slender purse with the expense of the double journey, to remaining any longer in ignorance of what was going on at Ramsgate—or at Dimchurch, as the case might be. Now that my mind was free from anxiety about my father, I don't know which tormented me most—my eagerness to set myself right with my sister-friend, or my vague dread of the mischief which Nugent might have done while my back was turned. Over and over again I asked myself, whether Miss Batchford had, or had not, shown my letter to Lucilla. Over and over again, I wondered whether it had been my happy privilege to reveal Nugent under his true aspect, and to preserve Lucilla for Oscar after all.

Towards the afternoon, on the seventeenth,

I went out alone to get a breath of fresh air, and a look at the shop-windows. I don't care who or what she may be—high or low ; handsome or ugly ; young or old—it always relieves a woman's mind to look at the shop-windows.

I had not been five minutes out, before I met my princely superintendent.

“ Any news for me to-day ?” I asked.

“ Not yet.”

“ Not yet ?” I repeated. “ You expect news then ?”

“ We expect an Italian steam-ship to arrive in port before the evening,” said the superintendent. “ Who knows what may happen ?”

He bowed and left me. I felt no great elation on contemplating the barren prospect which his last words had placed before me. So many steamers had arrived at Marseilles, without bringing any news of the missing man, that I attached very little importance to the arrival of the Italian ship. However, I had nothing to do—I wanted a walk—and I

thought I might as well stroll down to the port, and see the vessel come in.

The vessel was just entering the harbour by the time I got to the landing-stage.

I found our man employed to investigate travellers arriving by sea, punctually at his post. His influence broke through the vexatious French rules and regulations which forbid all freedom of public movement within official limits, and procured me a place in the room at the custom-house through which the passengers by the steamer would be obliged to pass. I accepted his polite attention, simply because I was glad to sit down and rest in a quiet place after my walk—not even the shadow of an idea that anything would come of my visit to the harbour being in my mind at the time.

After a long interval the passengers began to stream into the room. Looking languidly enough at the first half-dozen strangers who came in, I felt myself touched on the shoulder

from behind. There was our man, in a state of indescribable excitement, entreating me to compose myself!

Being perfectly composed already, I stared at him, and asked, "Why?"

"He is here!" cried the man. "Look!"

He pointed to the passengers still crowding into the room. I looked; and, instantly losing my head, started up with a cry that turned everybody's eyes on me. Yes! there was the poor dear discoloured face—there was Oscar himself, thunderstruck on his side at the sight of Me!

I snatched the key of his portmanteau out of his hand, and gave it to our man—who undertook to submit it to the custom-house examination, and to bring it to my lodging afterwards. Holding Oscar fast by the arm, I pushed my way through the crowd in the room, got outside, and hailed a cab at the dock gates. The people about, noticing my agitation, said to each other compassionately, "It's the blue man's mother!" Idiots! They

might have seen, I think, that I was only old enough to be his sister.

Once sheltered in the vehicle, I could draw my breath again, and reward him for all the anxiety he had caused me by giving him a kiss. I might have given him a thousand kisses. Amazement made him a perfectly passive creature in my hands. He only repeated faintly, over and over again, "What does it mean? what does it mean?"

"It means that you have friends, you wretch, who are fools enough to be too fond of you to give you up!" I said. "I am one of the fools. You will come to England with me to-morrow—and see for yourself if Lucilla is not another."

That reference to Lucilla restored him to the possession of his senses. He began to ask the questions that naturally occurred to him under the circumstances. Having plenty of questions in reserve, on my side, I told him briefly enough what had brought me to Marseilles, and what I had done, during my resi-

dence in that city, towards discovering the place of his retreat.

When he asked me next—after a momentary struggle with himself—what I could tell him of Nugent and Lucilla, it is not to be denied that I hesitated before I answered him. A moment's consideration, however, was enough to decide me on speaking out—for this plain reason, that a moment's consideration reminded me of the troubles and annoyances which had already befallen us as the result of concealing the truth. I told Oscar honestly all that I have related here—starting from my night interview with Nugent at Browndown, and ending with my precautionary measures for the protection of Lucilla while she was living under the care of her aunt.

I was greatly interested in watching the effect which these disclosures produced on Oscar.

My observation led me to form two conclusions. First conclusion, that time and

absence had not produced the slightest change in the love which the poor fellow bore to Lucilla. Second conclusion, that nothing but absolute proof would induce him to agree in my unfavourable opinion of his brother's character. It was in vain I declared that Nugent had quitted England pledged to find him, and had left it to me (as the event now proved) to make the discovery. He owned readily that he had seen nothing, and heard nothing, of Nugent. Nevertheless his confidence in his brother remained unshaken. "Nugent is the soul of honour," he repeated again and again—with a side-look at me which suggested that my frankly-avowed opinion of his brother had hurt and offended him.

I had barely time to notice this, before we reached my lodgings. He appeared to be unwilling to follow me into the house.

"I suppose you have some proof to support what you have said of Nugent," he resumed, stopping in the courtyard. "Have you writ-

ten to England since you have been here ? and have you had a reply ?”

“ I have written to Mrs. Finch,” I answered ; “ and I have not had a word in reply.”

“ Have you written to no one else ?”

I explained to him the position in which I stood towards Miss Batchford, and the hesitation which I had felt about writing to Grosse. The smouldering resentment against me that had been in him ever since I had spoken of his brother and of Lucilla, flamed up at last.

“ I entirely disagree with you,” he broke out angrily. “ You are wronging Lucilla and wronging Nugent. Lucilla is incapable of saying anything against you to Grosse ; and Nugent is equally incapable of misleading her as you suppose. What horrible ingratitude you attribute to one of them—and what horrible baseness to the other ! I have listened to you as patiently as I can ; and I feel sincerely obliged by the interest which you

have shown in me—but I cannot remain in your company any longer. Madame Prato-lungo, your suspicions are inhuman! You have not brought forward a shadow of proof in support of them. I will send here for my luggage, if you will allow me—and I will start for England by the next train. After what you have said, I can't rest till I have found out the truth for myself."

This was my reward for all the trouble that I had taken to discover Oscar Dubourg! Never mind the money I had spent—I am not rich enough to care about money—only consider the trouble. If I had been a man, I do really think I should have knocked him down. Being only a woman, I dropped him a low curtsy, and stung him with my tongue.

"As you please, sir," I said. "I have done my best to serve you—and you quarrel with me and leave me, in return. Go! You are not the first fool who has quarrelled with his best friend."

Either the words or the curtsey—or both together—brought him to his senses. He made me an apology—which I received. And he looked excessively foolish—which put me in an excellent humour again. “You stupid boy,” I said, taking his arm, and leading him to the stairs. “When we first met at Dimchurch did you find me a suspicious woman or an inhuman woman? Answer me that!”

He answered frankly enough.

“I found you all that was kind and good. Still, it is surely only natural to want *some* confirmation——” He checked himself there, and reverted abruptly to my letter to Mrs. Finch. The silence of the rector’s wife evidently alarmed him. “How long is it since you wrote?” he inquired.

“As long ago as the first of this month,” I replied.

He fell into thought. We ascended the next flight of stairs in silence. At the landing, he stopped me, and spoke again. My

unanswered letter was still uppermost in his mind.

“Mrs. Finch loses everything that *can* be lost,” he said. “Is it not likely—with her habits—that when she had written her answer, and wanted your letter to look at to put the address on it, your letter was like her handkerchief or her novel, or anything else—not to be found?”

So far, no doubt, this was quite in Mrs. Finch’s character. I could see that—but my mind was too much pre-occupied to draw the inference that followed. Oscar’s next words enlightened me.

“Have you tried the Poste-Restante?” he asked.

What could I possibly have been thinking of! Of course, she had lost my letter. Of course, the whole house would be upset in looking for it, and the rector would silence the uproar by ordering his wife to try the Poste - Restante. How strangely we had changed places! Instead of my clear head

thinking for Oscar, here was Oscar's clear head thinking for Me. Is my stupidity quite incredible? Remember, if you please, what a weight of trouble and anxiety had lain on my mind while I was at Marseilles. Can one think of everything while one is afflicted, as I was? Not even such a clever person as You can do that. If, as the saying is, "Homer sometimes nods"—why not Madame Pratolungo?

"I never thought of the Poste-Restante," I said to Oscar. "If you don't mind going back a little way, shall we inquire at once?"

He was perfectly willing. We went downstairs again, and out into the street. On our way to the post-office, I seized my first opportunity of making Oscar give me some account of himself.

"I have satisfied your curiosity, to the best of my ability," I said, as we walked arm-in-arm through the streets. "Now suppose you satisfy mine. A report of your having been

seen in a military hospital in Italy, is the only report of you which has reached me here. Of course, it is not true?"

"It is perfectly true."

"You, in a hospital, nursing wounded soldiers!"

"That is exactly what I have been doing."

No words could express my astonishment. I could only stop, and look at him.

"Was that the occupation which you had in view when you left England?" I asked.

"I had no object in leaving England," he answered, "but the object which I avowed to you. After what had happened, I owed it to Lucilla and I owed it to Nugent to go. I left England without caring where I went. The train to Lyons happened to be the first train that started on my arrival at Paris. I took the first train. At Lyons, I saw by chance an account in a French newspaper of the sufferings of some of the badly-wounded men, left still uncured after the battle of Solferino. I felt an impulse, in my own wretch-

edness, to help these other sufferers in *their* misery. On every other side of it, my life was wasted. The one worthy use to which I could put it was to employ myself in doing good ; and here was good to be done. I managed to get the necessary letters of introduction at Turin. With the help of these, I made myself of some use (under the regular surgeons and dressers) in nursing the poor mutilated, crippled men ; and I have helped a little afterwards, from my own resources, in starting them comfortably in new ways of life."

In those manly and simple words, he told me his story.

Once more I felt, what I had felt already, that there were hidden reserves of strength in the character of this innocent young fellow, which had utterly escaped my superficial observation of him. In choosing his vocation, he was, no doubt, only following the conventional modern course in such cases. Despair has its fashions, as well as dress. Ancient despair (especially of Oscar's sort) used to

turn soldier, or go into a monastery. Modern despair turns nurse ; binds up wounds, gives physic, and gets cured or not in that useful but nasty way. Oscar had certainly struck out nothing new for himself : he had only followed the fashion. Still, it implied, as I thought, both courage and resolution to have conquered the obstacles which he must have overcome, and to have held steadily on his course after he had once entered it. Having begun by quarrelling with him, I was in a fair way to end by respecting him. Surely this man was worth preserving for Lucilla, after all !

“ May I ask where you were going, when we met at the port ? ” I continued. “ Have you left Italy because there were no more wounded soldiers to be cured ? ”

“ There was no more work for me at the hospital to which I was attached,” he said. “ And there were certain obstacles in my way, as a stranger and a Protestant, among the poor and afflicted population outside the

hospital. I might have overcome those obstacles, with little trouble, among a people so essentially good-tempered and courteous as the Italians, if I had tried. But it occurred to me that my first duty was to my own countrymen. The misery crying for relief in London, is misery not paralleled in any city of Italy. When you met me, I was on my way to London, to place my services at the disposal of any clergyman, in a poor neighbourhood, who would accept such help as I can offer him." He paused a little—hesitated—and added in lower tones :—" That was one of my objects in returning to England. It is only honest to own to you that I had another motive besides."

"A motive connected with your brother and with Lucilla ?" I suggested.

"Yes. Don't misinterpret me ! I am not returning to England to retract what I said to Nugent. I still leave him free to plead his own cause with Lucilla in his own person. I am still resolved not to distress myself and

distress them, by returning to Dimchurch. But I have a longing that nothing can subdue, to know how it has ended between them. Don't ask me to say more than that ! In spite of the time that has passed, it breaks my heart to talk of Lucilla. I had looked forward to a meeting with you in London, and to hearing what I longed to hear, from your lips. Judge for yourself what my hopes were when I first saw your face ; and forgive me if I felt my disappointment bitterly, when I found that you had really no news to tell, and when you spoke of Nugent as you did." He stopped, and pressed my arm earnestly. " Suppose I am right about Mrs. Finch's letter ?" he added. " Suppose it should really be waiting for you at the post ?"

" Well ?"

" The letter may contain the news which I most want to hear."

I checked him there. " I am not sure of that," I answered. " I don't know what it is that you most want to hear."

I said those words with a purpose. What was the news he was longing for? In spite of all that he had told me, my instincts answered, News that Lucilla is still a single woman. My object in speaking as I had just spoken, was to tempt him into a reply which might confirm me in this opinion. He evaded the reply. Was that confirmation in itself? Yes—as *I* think!

“Will you tell me what there is in the letter?” he asked—passing, as you see, entirely over what I had just said to him.

“Yes—if you wish it,” I answered: not over well pleased with his want of confidence in me.

“No matter what the letter contains?” he went on, evidently doubting me.

I said Yes, again—that one word, and no more.

“I suppose it would be asking too much,” he persisted, “to ask you to let me read the letter myself?”

My temper, as you are well aware by this time, is not the temper of a saint. I drew my arm smartly out of his arm ; and I surveyed him with, what poor Pratolungo used to call, " my Roman look."

" Mr. Oscar Dubourg ! say, in plain words, that you distrust me."

He protested of course that he did nothing of the kind—without producing the slightest effect on me. Just run over in your mind the insults, worries, and anxieties which had assailed me, as the reward for my friendly interest in this man's welfare. Or, if that is too great an effort, be so good as to remember that Lucilla's farewell letter to me at Dimchurch, was now followed by the equally ungracious expression of Oscar's distrust—and this at a time when I had had serious trials of my own to sustain at my father's bedside. I think you will admit that a sweeter temper than mine might have not unnaturally turned a little sour under present circumstances.

I answered not a word to Oscar's protesta-

tions—I only searched vehemently in the pocket of my dress.

“Here,” I said, opening my card-case, “is my address in this place ; and here,” I went on, producing the document, “is my passport, if they want it.”

I forced the card and the passport into his hands. He took them in helpless astonishment.

“What am I to do with these ?” he asked.

“Take them to the Poste-Restante. If there is a letter for me with the Dimchurch post-mark, I authorise you to open it. Read it before it comes into my hands—and then perhaps you will be satisfied ?”

He declared that he would do nothing of the sort—and tried to force my documents back into my own possession.

“Please yourself,” I said. “I have done with you and your affairs. Mrs. Finch’s letter is of no earthly consequence to me. If it *is* at the Poste-Restante, I shall not trouble myself to ask for it. What concern have I

with news about Lucilla? What does it matter to *me* whether she is married or not? I am going back to my father and my sisters. Decide for yourself whether you want Mrs. Finch's letter or not."

That settled it. He went his way with my documents to the post-office; and I went mine back to the lodging.

Arrived in my room, I still held to the resolution which I had expressed to Oscar in the street. Why should I leave my poor old father to go back to England, and mix myself up in Lucilla's affairs? After the manner in which she had taken her leave of me, had I any reasonable prospect of being civilly received? Oscar was on his way to England—let Oscar manage his own affairs; let them all three (Oscar, Nugent, Lucilla) fight it out together among themselves. What had I, Pratolungo's widow, to do with this trumpery family entanglement? Nothing! It was a warm day for the time of year—Pratolungo's widow, like a wise woman, de-

terminated to make herself comfortable. She unlocked her packed box ; she removed her travelling costume, and put on her dressing-gown ; she took a turn in the room—and, if you had come across her at that moment, I wouldn't have stood in *your* shoes for something, I can tell you !

(What do you think of my consistency by this time ? How often have I changed my mind about Lucilla and Oscar ? Reckon it up, from the time when I left Dimchurch. What a picture of perpetual self-contradiction I present—and how improbable it is that I should act in this illogical way ! *You* never alter your mind under the influence of your temper or your circumstances. No : you are, what they call, a consistent character. And I ? Oh, I am only a human being—and I feel painfully conscious that I have no business to be in a book.)

In about half an hour's time, the servant appeared with a little paper parcel for me. It had been left by a stranger with an English

accent and a terrible face. He had announced his intention of calling a little later. The servant, a bouncing fat wench, trembled as she repeated the message, and asked if there was anything amiss between me and the man with the terrible face.

I opened the parcel. It contained my passport, and, sure enough, the letter from Mrs. Finch.

Had he opened it? Yes! He had not been able to resist the temptation to read it. And more, he had written a line or two on it in pencil, thus :—"As soon as I am fit to see you, I will implore your pardon. I dare not trust myself in your presence yet. Read the letter, and you will understand why."

I opened the letter.

It was dated the fifth of September. I ran over the first few sentences carelessly enough. Thanks for my letter—congratulations on my father's prospect of recovery—information about baby's gums and the rector's last ser-

mon—more information about somebody else, which Mrs. Finch felt quite sure would interest and delight me. What!!! “Mr. Oscar Dubourg has come back, and is now with Lucilla at Ramsgate.”

I crumpled the letter up in my hand. Nugent had justified my worst anticipations of what he would do in my absence. What did the true Mr. Oscar Dubourg, reading that sentence at Marseilles, think of his brother now? We are all mortal—we are all wicked. It is monstrous, but it is true. I had a moment's triumph.

The wicked moment gone, I was good again—that is to say, I was ashamed of myself.

I smoothed out the letter, and looked eagerly for news of Lucilla's health. If the news was favourable, my letter committed to Miss Batchford's care must have been shown to Lucilla by this time; must have exposed Nugent's abominable personation of his brother; and must have thus preserved her for

Oscar. In that case, all would be well again (and my darling herself would own it) — thanks to Me!

After telling me the news from Ramsgate, Mrs. Finch began to drift into, what you call, Twaddle. She had just discovered (exactly as Oscar had supposed) that she had lost my letter. She would keep her own letter back until the next day on the chance of finding it. If she failed she must try *Poste-Restante*, at the suggestion (not of Mr. Finch—there I was wrong)—at the suggestion of Zillah, who had relatives in foreign parts, and had tried *Poste-Restante* in her case too. So Mrs. Finch drivelled mildly on, in her large loose untidy handwriting, to the bottom of the third page.

I turned over. The handwriting suddenly grew untidier than ever; two great blots defaced the paper; the style became feebly hysterical. Good Heavens, what did I read when I made it out at last! See for yourselves; here are the words:

“Some hours have passed—it is just tea-time—oh, my dear friend, I can hardly hold the pen, I tremble so—would you believe it, Miss Batchford has arrived at the rectory—she brings the dreadful news that Lucilla has eloped with Oscar—we don’t know why—we don’t know where, except that they have gone away together privately—a letter from Oscar tells Miss Batchford as much as that, and no more—oh, pray come back as soon as you can—Mr. Finch washes his hands of it—and Miss Batchford has left the house again in a fury with him—I am in dreadful agitation, and I have given it Mr. Finch says to baby, who is screaming black in the face. Yours affectionately,

“AMELIA FINCH.”

All the rages I had ever been in before in my life were as nothing compared with the rage that devoured me when I had read that fourth page of Mrs. Finch’s letter. Nugent had got the better of me and my precautions!

Nugent had robbed his brother of Lucilla, in the vilest manner, with perfect impunity! I cast all feminine restraints to the winds. I sat down with my legs anyhow, like a man. I rammed my hands into the pockets of my dressing-gown. Did I cry? A word in your ear—and let it go no farther. I swore.

How long the fit lasted, I don't know. I only remember that I was disturbed by a knock at my door.

I flung open the door in a fury—and confronted Oscar on the threshold.

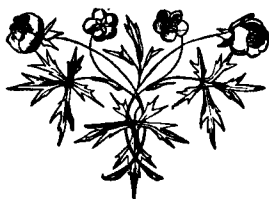
There was a look in his face that instantly quieted me. There was a tone in his voice that brought the tears suddenly into my eyes.

“I must leave for England in two hours,” he said. “Will you forgive me, Madame Pratolungo, before I go?”

Only those words! And yet—if you had seen him, if you had heard him, as he spoke them—you would have been ready as I was

—not only to forgive him—but to go to the ends of the earth with him; and you would have told him so, as I did.

In two hours more, we were in the train, on our way to England.





CHAPTER THE NINTH.

ON THE WAY TO THE END. FIRST STAGE.

YOU will perhaps expect me to give some account of how Oscar bore the discovery of his brother's conduct.

I find it by no means easy to do this. Oscar baffled me.

The first words of any importance which he addressed to me were spoken on our way to the station. Rousing himself from his own thoughts, he said very earnestly—

“I want to know what conclusion you have drawn from Mrs. Finch's letter.”

Naturally enough, under the circumstances,

I tried to avoid answering him. He was not to be put off in that way.

“You will do me a favour,” he went on, “if you will reply to my question. The letter has bred in me such a vile suspicion of my dear good brother, who never deceived me in his life, that I would rather believe I am out of my mind than believe in my own interpretation of it. Do *you* infer from what Mrs. Finch writes, that Nugent has presented himself to Lucilla under my name? Do *you* believe that he has persuaded her to leave her friends, under the impression that she has yielded to My entreaties, and trusted herself to My care?”

I answered in the fewest and plainest words, “That is what your brother has done.”

A sudden change passed over him. My reply seemed to have set his last doubts at rest in an instant.

“That is what my brother has done,” he repeated. “After all that I sacrificed to him—after all that I had trusted to his honour—when I left England.” He paused, and con-

sidered a little. "What does such a man deserve?" he went on; speaking to himself, in a low threatening tone that startled me.

"He deserves," I said, "what he will get when we reach England. You have only to show yourself to make him repent his wickedness to the last day of his life. Are exposure and defeat not punishment enough for such a man as Nugent?" I stopped, and waited for his answer.

He turned his face away from me, and said no more until we arrived at the station. There, he drew me aside for a moment out of hearing of the strangers about us.

"Why should I take you away from your father?" he asked abruptly. "I am behaving very selfishly—and I only see it now."

"Make your mind easy," I said. "If I had not met you to-day, I should have gone to England to-morrow for Lucilla's sake."

"But now you *have* met me," he persisted, "why shouldn't I spare you the journey? I could write and tell you every

thing—without putting you to this fatigue and expense.”

“If you say a word more,” I answered, “I shall think you have some reason of your own for wishing to go to England by yourself.”

He cast one quick suspicious look at me—and led the way back to the booking-office without uttering another word. I was not at all satisfied with him. I thought his conduct very strange.

In silence we took our tickets; in silence, we got into the railway-carriage. I attempted to say something encouraging, when we started. “Don’t notice me,” was all he replied. “You will be doing me a kindness, if you will let me bear it by myself.” In my former experience of him, he had talked his way out of all his other troubles—he had clamorously demanded the expression of my sympathy with him. In this greatest trouble, he was like another being; I hardly knew him again! Were the hidden reserves in his nature (stirred up by another serious call on them)

showing themselves once more on the surface as they had shown themselves already, on the fatal first day when Lucilla tried her sight? In that way I accounted for the mere superficial change in him, at the time. What was actually going on below the surface it defied my ingenuity even to guess. Perhaps I shall best describe the sort of vague apprehension which he aroused in me—after what had passed between us at the station—by saying that I would not for worlds have allowed him to go to England by himself.

Left as I now was to my own resources, I occupied the first hours of the journey, in considering what course it would be safest and best for us to take, on reaching England.

I decided, in the first place, that we ought to go straight to Dimchurch. If any tidings had been obtained of Lucilla, they would be sure to have received them at the rectory. Our route, after reaching Paris, must be therefore by way of Dieppe; thence across the channel

to Newhaven, near Brighton—and so to Dimchurch.

In the second place—assuming it to be always possible that we might see Lucilla at the rectory—the risk of abruptly presenting Oscar to her in his own proper person might, for all I knew to the contrary, be a very serious one. It would relieve us, as I thought, of a grave responsibility, if we warned Grosse of our arrival, and so enabled him to be present, if he thought it necessary, in the interests of Lucilla's health. I put this view (as also my plan for returning by way of Dieppe) to Oscar. He briefly consented to everything—he ungraciously left it all to me.

Accordingly, on our arrival at Lyons, having some time for refreshment at our disposal before we went on, I telegraphed to Mr. Finch at the rectory, and to Grosse in London; informing them (as well as I could calculate it) that, if we were lucky in catching trains and steamboats, Oscar and I might be in Dimchurch in good time, on the next night

—that is to say, on the night of the eighteenth. In any case, they were to expect us at the earliest possible moment.

These difficulties disposed of, and a little store of refreshment for the night packed in my basket, we re-entered the train, for our long journey to Paris.

Among the new passengers who joined us at Lyons was a gentleman whose face was English, and whose dress was the dress of a clergyman. For the first time in my life, I hailed the appearance of a priest with a feeling of relief. The reason was this. From the moment when I had read Mrs. Finch's letter until now, a horrid doubt, which a priest was just the man to solve, had laid its leaden weight on my mind—and, I firmly believe, on Oscar's mind as well. Had time enough passed, since Lucilla had left Ramsgate, to allow of Nugent's marrying her, under his brother's name?

As the train rolled out of the station, I, the enemy of priests, began to make myself agree-

able to *this* priest. He was young and shy—but I conquered him. Just as the other travellers were beginning (with the exception of Oscar) to compose themselves to sleep, I put my case to the clergyman. “A and B, sir, lady and gentleman, both of age, leave one place in England, and go to live in another place, on the fifth of this month—how soon, if you please, can they be lawfully married after that?”

“I presume you mean in church?” said the young clergyman.

“In church, of course.” (To that extent I believed I might answer for Lucilla, without any fear of making a mistake.)

“They may be married by Licence,” said the clergyman—“provided one of them continues to reside in that other place to which they travelled on the fifth—on the twenty-first, or (possibly) even the twentieth of this month.”

“Not before?”

“Certainly not before.”

It was then the night of the seventeenth. I gave my companion's hand a little squeeze in the dark. Here was a glimpse of encouragement to cheer us on the journey. Before the marriage could take place, we should be in England. "We have time before us," I whispered to Oscar. "We will save Lucilla yet."

"Shall we find Lucilla?" was all he whispered back.

I had forgotten that serious difficulty. No answer to Oscar's question could possibly present itself until we reached the rectory. Between this and then, there was nothing for it but to keep patience and to keep hope.

I refrain from encumbering this part of my narrative with any detailed account of the little accidents, lucky and unlucky, which alternately hastened or retarded our journey home. Let me only say that, before midnight on the eighteenth, Oscar and I drove up to the rectory gate.

Mr. Finch himself came out to receive us,

with a lamp in his hand. He lifted his eyes (and his lamp) devotionally to the sky when he saw Oscar. The two first words he said, were :—

“ Inscrutable Providence !”

“ Have you found Lucilla ?” I asked.

Mr. Finch—with his whole attention fixed on Oscar—wrung my hand mechanically, and said, I was a “ good creature ;” much as he might have patted, and spoken to, Oscar’s companion, if the companion had been a dog. I almost wished myself that animal for the moment—I should have had the privilege of biting Mr. Finch. Oscar impatiently repeated my question ; the rector, at the time, officiously assisting him to descend from the carriage, and leaving me to get out as I could.

“ Did you hear Madame Pratolungo ?” Oscar asked. “ Is Lucilla found ?”

“ Dear Oscar, we hope to find her, now you have come.”

That answer revealed to me the secret of Mr. Finch’s extraordinary politeness to his

young friend. The last chance, as things were, of preventing Lucilla's marriage to a man who had squandered away every farthing of his money, was the chance of Oscar's arrival in England before the ceremony could take place. The measure of Oscar's importance to Mr. Finch was now, more literally than ever, the measure of Oscar's fortune.

I asked for news of Grosse as we went in. The rector actually found some comparatively high notes in his prodigious voice, to express his amazement at my audacity in speaking to him of anybody but Oscar.

"Oh, dear, dear me!" cried Mr. Finch, impatiently conceding to me one precious moment of his attention. "Don't bother about Grosse! Grosse is ill in London. There is a note for you from Grosse.—Take care of the door-step, dear Oscar," he went on in his deepest and gravest bass notes. "Mrs. Finch is so anxious to see you. We have both looked forward to your arrival with such eager hope—such impatient affection, so to

“speak. Let me put down your hat. Ah! how you must have suffered! Share my trust in an all-wise Providence, and meet this trial with cheerful submission as I do. All is not lost yet. Bear up! bear up!” He threw open the parlour door. “Mrs. Finch! compose yourself. Our dear adopted son. Our afflicted Oscar!”

Is it necessary to say what Mrs. Finch was about, and how Mrs. Finch looked?

There were the three unchangeable institutions—the novel, the baby, and the missing pocket-handkerchief! There was the gaudy jacket over the long trailing dressing-gown—and the damp lady inside them, damp as ever! Receiving Oscar with a mouth drawn down at the corners, and a head that shook sadly in sympathy with him, Mrs. Finch’s face underwent a most extraordinary transformation when she turned my way next. To my astonishment, her dim eyes actually sparkled; a broad smile of irrepressible contentment showed itself cunningly to *me*, in place of the

dismal expression which had welcomed Oscar. Holding up the baby in triumph, the lady of the rectory whispered these words in my ear :—

“What do you think he has done since you have been away?”

“I really don’t know,” I answered.

“He has cut two teeth! Put your finger in and feel.”

Others might bewail the family misfortune. The family triumph filled the secret mind of Mrs. Finch, to the exclusion of every other earthly consideration. I put my finger in as instructed, and got instantly bitten by the ferocious baby. But for a new outburst of the rector’s voice at the moment, Mrs. Finch (if I am any judge of physiognomy) must have certainly relieved herself by a scream of delight. As it was, she opened her mouth; and (having lost her handkerchief as already stated) retired into a corner, and gagged herself with the baby.

In the meantime, Mr. Finch had produced

from a cupboard near the fireplace, two letters. The first he threw down impatiently on the table. "Oh, dear, dear! what a nuisance other people's letters are!" The second he handled with extraordinary care; offering it to Oscar with a heavy sigh, and with eyes that turned up martyr-like to the ceiling. "Rouse yourself, and read it," said Mr. Finch in his most pathetic pulpit tones. "I would have spared you, Oscar, if I could. All our hopes depend, dear boy, on what you can say to guide us when you have read those lines."

Oscar took the enclosure out of the envelope—ran over the first words—glanced at the signature—and, with a look of mingled rage and horror, threw the letter on the floor.

"Don't ask me to read it!" he cried, in the first burst of passion which had escaped him yet. "If I read it, I shall kill him when we meet." He dropped into a chair, and hid his face in his hands. "Oh, Nugent! Nugent!

Nugent!" he moaned to himself with a cry that was dreadful to hear.

It was no time for standing on ceremony. I picked up the letter, and looked at it without asking leave. It proved to be the letter from Nugent (already inserted at the close of Lucilla's Journal), informing Miss Batchford of her niece's flight from Ramsgate, and signed in Oscar's name. The only words which it is necessary to repeat here, are these:—"She accompanies me, at my express request, to the house of a married lady who is a relative of mine, and under whose care she will remain, until the time arrives for our marriage."

Those lines instantly lightened my heart of the burden that had oppressed it on the journey. Nugent's married relative was Oscar's married relative too. Oscar had only to tell us where the lady lived—and Lucilla would be found!

I stopped Mr. Finch, in the act of maddening Oscar by administering pastoral consolation to him.

"Leave it to me," I said, showing him the letter. "I know what you want."

The rector stared at me indignantly. I turned to Mrs. Finch.

"We have had a weary journey," I went on. "Oscar is not so well used to travelling as I am. Where is his room?"

Mrs. Finch rose to show the way. Her husband opened his lips to interfere.

"Leave it to me," I repeated. "I understand him; and you don't."

For once in his life, the Pope of Dimchurch was reduced to silence. His amazement at my audacity defied even *his* powers of expression. I took Oscar's arm, and said, "You are worn out. Go to your room. I will make you something warm and bring it up to you myself in a few minutes." He neither looked at me nor answered me—he yielded silently, and followed Mrs. Finch. I took from the sideboard, on which supper was waiting, the materials I wanted; set the kettle boiling; made my renovating mixture; and

advanced to the door with it—followed from first to last, move where I might, by the staring and scandalised eyes of Mr. Finch. The moment in which I opened the door was also the moment in which the rector recovered himself. “Permit me to inquire, Madame Pratolungo,” he said with his loftiest emphasis, “in what capacity are You here?”

“In the capacity of Oscar’s friend,” I answered. “You will get rid of us both to-morrow.” I banged the door behind me, and went up-stairs. If I had been Mr. Finch’s wife, I believe I should have ended in making quite an agreeable man of him.

Mrs. Finch met me in the passage on the first floor, and pointed out Oscar’s room. I found him walking backwards and forwards restlessly. The first words he said alluded to his brother’s letter. I had arranged not to disturb him by any reference to that painful matter until the next morning ; and I tried to change the topic. It was useless. There was an anxiety in his mind which was not to

be dismissed at will. He insisted on my instantly setting that anxiety at rest.

"I don't want to see the letter," he said. "I only want to know all that it says about Lucilla."

"All that it says may be summed up in this. Lucilla is perfectly safe."

He caught me by the arm, and looked me searchingly in the face.

"Where?" he asked. "With *him*?"

"With a married lady who is a relative of his."

He dropped my arm, and considered for a moment.

"My cousin at Sydenham!" he exclaimed.

"Do you know the house?"

"Perfectly well."

"We will go there to-morrow. Let that content you for to-night. Get to rest."

I gave him my hand. He took it mechanically—absorbed in his own thoughts.

"Didn't I say something foolish down-

stairs?" he asked, putting the question suddenly, with an odd suspicious look at me.

"You were quite worn out," I said consolingly. "Nobody noticed it."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure. Good night."

I left the room, feeling much as I had felt at the station at Marseilles. I was not satisfied with him. I thought his conduct very strange.

On returning to the parlour, I found nobody there but Mrs. Finch. The rector's offended dignity had left the rector no honourable alternative but to withdraw to his own room. I ate my supper in peace; and Mrs. Finch (rocking the cradle with her foot) chattered away to her heart's content about all that had happened in my absence.

I gathered, here and there, from what she said, some particulars worth mentioning.

The new disagreement between Mr. Finch and Miss Batchford, which had driven the old

lady out of the rectory almost as soon as she set foot in it, had originated in Mr. Finch's exasperating composure when he heard of his daughter's flight. He supposed, of course, that Lucilla had left Ramsgate with Oscar—whose signed settlements on his future wife were safe in Mr. Finch's possession. It was only when Miss Batchford had communicated with Grosse, and when the discovery followed which revealed the penniless Nugent as the man who had eloped with Lucilla, that Mr. Finch's parental anxiety (seeing no money likely to come of it) became roused to action. He, Miss Batchford, and Grosse had all, in their various ways, done their best to trace the fugitives—and had all alike been baffled by the impossibility of discovering the residence of the lady mentioned in Nugent's letter. My telegram, announcing my return to England with Oscar, had inspired them with their first hope of being able to interfere, and stop the marriage before it was too late.

The occurrence of Grosse's name in Mrs.

Finch's rambling narrative, recalled to my memory what the rector had told me at the garden gate. I had not yet received the letter which the German had sent to wait my arrival at Dimchurch. After a short search, we found it—where it had been contemptuously thrown by Mr. Finch—on the parlour table.

A few lines comprised the whole letter. Grosse informed me that he had so fretted himself about Lucilla, that he had been attacked by "a visitation of gouts." It was impossible to move his "foots" without instantly plunging into the torture of the infernal regions. "If it is you, my goot dear, who are going to find her," he concluded, "come to me first in London. I have something most dismal-serious to say to you about our poor little Feench's eyes."

No words can tell how that last sentence startled and grieved me. Mrs. Finch increased my anxiety and alarm by repeating what she had heard Miss Batchford say, during her brief visit to the rectory, on the

subject of Lucilla's sight. Grosse had been seriously dissatisfied with the state of his patient's eyes, when he had seen them as long ago as the fourth of the month ; and, on the morning of the next day, the servant had reported Lucilla as being hardly able to distinguish objects in the view from the window of her room. Later on the same day, she had secretly left Ramsgate ; and Grosse's letter proved that she had not been near her surgical attendant since.

Weary as I was after the journey, this miserable news kept me waking long after I had gone to my bed. The next morning, I was up with the servants—impatient to start for London, by the first train.



CHAPTER THE TENTH.

ON THE WAY TO THE END. SECOND STAGE.

EARLY riser as I was, I found that Oscar had risen earlier still. He had left the rectory and had disturbed Mr. Gootheridge's morning slumbers by an application at the inn for the key of Browndown.

On his return to the rectory, he merely said that he had been to see after various things belonging to him, which were still left in the empty house. His look and manner as he gave us this brief explanation were, to my mind, more unsatisfactory than ever. I made no remark; and, observing that his loose

travelling coat was buttoned awry over the breast, I set it right for him. My hand, as I did this, touched his breast-pocket. He started back directly—as if there was something in the pocket which he did not wish me to feel. Was it something he had brought from Browndown ?

We got away—encumbered by Mr. Finch, who insisted on attaching himself to Oscar—by the first express train, which took us straight to London. Comparison of timetables, on reaching the terminus, showed that I had leisure to spare for a brief visit to Grosse, before we again took the railway back to Sydenham. Having decided not to mention the bad news about Lucilla's sight to Oscar, until I had seen the German first, I made the best excuse that suggested itself, and drove away—leaving the two gentlemen in the waiting-room at the station.

I found Grosse confined to his easy-chair, with his gouty foot enveloped in cool cabbage-leaves. Between pain and anxiety, his

eyes were wilder, his broken English was more grotesque than ever. When I appeared at the door of his room and said good morning—in the frenzy of his impatience he shook his fist at me.

“Good morning go-damn !” he roared out, “Where ? where ? where is Feench ?”

I told him where we believed Lucilla to be. Grosse turned his head, and shook his fist at a bottle on the chimney-piece next.

“Get that bottles on the chimney,” he said. “And the eye-baths by the side of him. Don’t stop with your talky-talky-chatterations here. Go ! Save her eyes. Look ! You do this. You throw her head back—soh !” He illustrated the position so forcibly with his own head that he shook his gouty foot, and screamed with the pain of it. He went on nevertheless, glaring frightfully through his spectacles ; gnashing his moustache fiercely between his teeth. “Throw her head back. Fill the eye-baths ; turn him upsides-down over her open eyes. Drown them turn-turn-

about in my mixtures. Drown them, I say, one-down-todder-come-on, and if she screech never mind it. Then bring her to me. For the love of Gott, bring her to me. If you tie her hands and foots, bring her to me. What is the womans stopping for? Go! go! go!"

"I want to ask you a question about Oscar," I said, "before I go."

He seized the pillow which supported his head—evidently intending to expedite my departure by throwing it at me. I produced the railway time-table as the best defensive weapon at my command. "Look at it for yourself," I said; "and you will see that I must wait at the station, if I don't wait here."

With some difficulty, I satisfied him that it was impossible to leave London for Sydenham before a certain hour, and that I had at least ten minutes to spare which might be just as well passed in consulting him. He closed his glaring eyes, and laid his head back on the chair, thoroughly exhausted with

his own outbreak of excitement. "No matter how things goes," he said, "a womans must wag her tongue. Goot. Wag yours."

"I am placed in a very difficult position," I began. "Oscar is going with me to Lucilla. I shall of course take care, in the first place, that he and Nugent do not meet, unless I am present at the interview. But I am not equally sure of what I ought to do in the case of Lucilla. Must I keep them apart until I have first prepared her to see Oscar?"

"Let her see the devil himself if you like," growled Grosse, "so long as you bring her here afterwards-directly to me. You will do the bettermost thing, if you prepare Oscar. *She* wants no preparations! She is enough disappointed in him as it is!"

"Disappointed in him?" I repeated. "I don't understand you."

He settled himself wearily in his chair, and referred, in a softened and saddened tone, to that private conversation of his with Lucilla, at Ramsgate, which has already been

reported in the Journal. I was now informed, for the first time, of those changes in her sensations and in her ways of thinking which had so keenly vexed and mortified her. I heard of the ominous absence of the old thrill of pleasure, when Nugent took her hand on meeting her at the seaside—I heard how bitterly his personal appearance had disappointed her (when she had seen his features in detail) by comparison with the charming ideal picture which she had formed of her lover in the days of her blindness: those happier days, as she had called them, when she was Poor Miss Finch.

“Surely,” I said, “all the old feelings will come back to her when she sees Oscar?”

“They will never come back to her—no, not if she sees fifty Oscars!”

He was beginning to frighten me, or to irritate me—I can hardly say which. I only know that I persisted in disputing with him. “When she sees the true man,” I went on,

“do you mean to say she will feel the same disappointment——?”

I could get no farther than that. He cut me short there, without ceremony.

“You foolish womans!” he interposed, “she will feel more than the same. I have told you already it was one enormous disappointments to her when she saw the handsome brodder with the fair complexions. Ask your own self what it will be when she sees the ugly brodder with the blue face. I tell you this!—she will think your true man the worst impostor of the two.”

There I indignantly contradicted him.

“His face *may* be a disappointment to her,” I said—“I own that. But there it will end. Her hand will tell her, when he takes it, that there is no impostor deceiving her this time.”

“Her hand will tell her nothing—no more than yours. I had not so much hard hearts in me as to say that to *her*, when she asked me. I say it to *you*. Hold your tongue and

listen. All those thrill-tingles that she once had when he touched her, belong to anodder time—the time gone-by when her sight was in her fingers and not in her eyes. With those fine-superfine-feelings of the days when she was blind, she pays now for her grand new privilege of opening her eyes on the world. (And worth the price too !) Do you understand yet ? It is a sort of swop-bargain between Nature and this poor girls of ours. I take away your eyes—I give you your fine touch. I give you your eyes—I take away your fine touch. Soh ! that is plain. You see now ?”

I was too mortified and too miserable to answer him. Through all our later troubles, I had looked forward so confidently to Oscar’s re-appearance as the one sufficient condition on which Lucilla’s happiness would be certainly restored ! What had become of my anticipations now ? I sat silent ; staring in stupid depression at the pattern of the carpet. Grosse took out his watch.

“Your ten-minutes-time has counted himself out,” he said.

I neither moved nor heeded him. His ferocious eyes began to flame again behind his monstrous spectacles.

“Go-be-off-with-you!” he shouted at me as if I was deaf. “Her eyes! her eyes! While you stop chatterboxing here, her eyes are in danger. What with her frettings and her cryings and her damn-nonsense-lofe-business, I swear you my solemn oath her sight was in danger when I saw her a whole fortnight gone-by. Do you want my big pillow to fly bang at your head? You don’t want him? Be-off-away with you then, or you will have him in one-two-three time! Be-off-away—and bring her back to me before night!”

I returned to the railway. Of all the women whom I passed in the crowded streets, I doubt if one had a heavier heart in her bosom that morning than mine.

To make matters worse still, my travelling

companions (one in the refreshment-room, and one pacing the platform) received my account of my interview with Grosse in a manner which seriously disappointed and discouraged me. Mr. Finch's inhuman conceit treated my melancholy news of his daughter as a species of complimentary tribute to his own foresight. "You remember, Madame Pratlungo, I took high ground in this matter from the first. I protested against the proceedings of the man Grosse, as involving a purely worldly interference with the ways of an inscrutable Providence. With what effect? My paternal influence was repudiated; my Moral Weight was, so to speak, set aside. And now you see the result. Take it to heart, dear friend. May it be a warning to you!" He sighed with ponderous complacency, and turned from me to the girl behind the counter. "I will take another cup of tea."

Oscar's reception of me, when I found him on the platform, and told him next of Lu-

cilla's critical state, was more than discouraging. It is no exaggeration to say that he alarmed me.

"Another item in the debt I owe to Nugent!" he said. Not a word of sympathy, not a word of sorrow. That vindictive answer, and nothing more.

We started for Sydenham.

From time to time, I looked at Oscar sitting opposite to me, to see if any change appeared in him as we drew nearer and nearer to the place in which Lucilla was now living. No! Still the same ominous silence, the same unnatural self-repression possessed him.

Except the momentary outbreak, when Mr. Finch had placed Nugent's letter in his hand on the previous evening, not the faintest token of what was really going on in his mind had escaped him since we had left Marseilles. He, who could weep over all his other griefs as easily and as spontaneously as a woman, had not shed a tear since the fatal

day when he had discovered that his brother had played him false—that brother who had been the god of his idolatry, the sacred object of his gratitude and his love! When a man of Oscar's temperament becomes frozen up for days together in his own thoughts—when he keeps his own counsel; when he asks for no sympathy, and utters no complaint—the sign is a serious one. There are hidden forces gathering in him which will burst their way to the surface—for good or for evil—with an irresistible result. Watching Oscar attentively behind my veil, I felt the certain assurance that the part he would take in the terrible conflict of interests now awaiting us, would be a part which I should remember to the latest day of my life.

We reached Sydenham, and went to the nearest hotel.

On the railway—with other travellers in the carriage—it had been impossible to consult on the safest method of approaching Lu-

cilla, in the first instance. That serious question now pressed for instant decision. We sat down to discuss it, in the room which we had hired at the hotel.





CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH.

ON THE WAY TO THE END. THIRD STAGE.

ON former occasions of doubt or difficulty, it had always been Oscar's habit to follow the opinions of others. On this occasion he was the first to speak, and to assert an opinion of his own.

"It seems needless to waste time in discussing our different views," he said. "There is only one thing to be done. I am the person principally concerned in this matter. Wait here, while I go to the house."

He spoke without any of his usual hesitation; he took up his hat without looking either at Mr. Finch or at me. I felt more

and more convinced that the influence which Nugent's vile breach of confidence had exerted over Oscar's mind, was an influence which had made a dangerous man of him. Resolved to prevent him from leaving us, I insisted on his returning to his chair, and hearing what I had to say. At the same moment, Mr. Finch rose, and placed himself between Oscar and the door. Seeing this, I thought it might be wise if I kept my interference in reserve, and allowed the rector to speak first.

"Wait a moment, Oscar," said Mr. Finch gravely. "You are forgetting Me."

Oscar waited doggedly, hat in hand.

Mr. Finch paused, evidently considering what words he should use before he spoke again. His respect for Oscar's pecuniary position was great; but his respect for himself—especially at the present crisis—was, if possible, greater still. In deference to the first sentiment he was as polite, and in deference to the second he was as positive

in phrasing his remonstrance, as a man could be.

“Permit me to remind you, dear Oscar, that my claim to interfere, as Lucilla’s father, is at least equal to yours,” proceeded the rector. “In the hour of my daughter’s need, it is my parental duty to be present. If you go to your cousin’s house, my position imperatively requires that I should go too.”

Oscar’s reception of this proposal confirmed the grave apprehensions with which he had inspired me. He flatly refused to have Mr. Finch for a companion.

“Excuse me,” he answered shortly. “I wish to go to the house alone.”

“Permit me to ask your reason,” said the rector, still preserving his conciliatory manner.

“I wish to see my brother in private,” Oscar replied, with his eyes on the ground.

Mr. Finch, still restraining himself, but still not moving from the door, looked at me. I

hastened to interfere before there was any serious disagreement between them.

“I venture to think,” I said, “that you are both wrong. Whether one of you goes, or both of you go, the result will be the same. The chances are a hundred to one, against your being admitted into the house.”

They both turned on me together, and asked what I meant.

“You can’t force your way in,” I said. “You must do one of two things. You must either give your names to the servant at the door, or you must withhold your names. If you give them, you warn Nugent of what is coming—and he is not the man to let you into the house under those circumstances. If you take the other way, and keep your names concealed, you present yourselves as strangers. Is Nugent likely to be accessible to strangers? Would Lucilla, in her present position, consent to receive two men who are unknown to her? Take my word for it—you will not only gain nothing if

you go to the house—you will actually make it more difficult to communicate with Lucilla than it is already.”

There was a moment's silence. Both the men felt that my objections were not easy to answer. Once more, Oscar took the lead.

“Do *you* propose to go?” he asked.

“No,” I answered. “I propose to send a letter to Lucilla. A letter will find its way to her.”

This again was unanswerable. Oscar inquired next what the purport of the letter was to be. I replied that I proposed to ask her to grant me a private interview—nothing more.

“Suppose Lucilla refuses?” said Mr. Finch.

“She will not refuse,” I rejoined. “There was a little misunderstanding between us—I admit—at the time when I went abroad. I mean to refer frankly to that misunderstanding as my reason for writing. I shall put your

daughter on her honour to give me an opportunity of setting things right between us. If I summon Lucilla to do an act of justice, I believe she will not refuse me."

(This, let me add in parenthesis, was the plan of action which I had formed on the way to Sydenham. I had only waited to mention it, until I heard what the two men proposed to do first.)

Oscar, standing hat in hand, glanced at Mr. Finch (also hat in hand) keeping obstinately near the door. If he persisted in carrying out his purpose of going alone to his cousin's house, the rector's face and manner expressed, with the politest plainness, the intention of following him. Oscar was placed between a clergyman and a woman, both equally determined to have their own way. Under those circumstances, there was no alternative—unless he wished to produce a public scandal—but to yield, or appear to yield, to one or the other of us. He selected me.

"If you succeed in seeing her," he asked, "what do you mean to do?"

"I mean either to bring her back with me here to her father and to you, or to make an appointment with her to see you both where she is now living," I replied.

Oscar—after another look at the immovable rector—rang the bell, and ordered writing materials.

"One more question," he said. "Assuming that Lucilla receives you at the house, do you intend to see——?" He stopped; his eyes shrank from meeting mine. "Do you intend to see anybody else?" he resumed: still evading the plain utterance of his brother's name.

"I intend to see nobody but Lucilla," I answered. "It is no business of mine to interfere between you and your brother." (Heaven forgive me for speaking in that way to him, while I had the firm resolution to interfere between them in my mind all the time!)

"Write your letter," he said, "on condition that I see the reply."

"It is needless, I presume, for me to make the same stipulation?" added the rector. "In my parental capacity——"

I recognised his parental capacity, before he could say any more. "You shall both see the reply," I said—and sat down to my letter; writing merely what I had told them I should write: "Dear Lucilla, I have just returned from the Continent. For the sake of justice, and for the sake of old times, let me see you immediately—without mentioning our appointment to anybody. I pledge myself to satisfy you, in five minutes, that I have never been unworthy of your affection and your confidence. The bearer waits for your reply."

I handed those lines to the two gentlemen to read. Mr. Finch made no remark—he was palpably dissatisfied at the secondary position which he occupied. Oscar said, "I see no objection to the letter. I will do

nothing until I have read the answer." With those words, he dictated to me his cousin's address. I gave the letter myself to one of the servants at the hotel.

"Is it far from here?" I asked.

"Barely ten minutes' walk, ma'am."

"You understand that you are to wait for an answer?"

"Yes, ma'am."

He went out. As well as I can remember, an interval of at least half an hour passed before his return. You will form some idea of the terrible oppression of suspense that now laid its slowly-torturing weight on all three of us, when I tell you that not one word was spoken in the room from the time when the servant went out, to the time when the servant came in again.

When the man returned he had a letter in his hand!

My fingers shook so that I could hardly open it. Before I had read a word, the sight of the writing struck a sudden chill through

me. The body of the note was written by the hand of a stranger! And the signature at the end was traced in the large straggling childish characters which I remembered so well, when Lucilla had written her first letter to Oscar in the days when she was blind!

The note was expressed in these strange words :—" I cannot receive you here ; but I can, and will, come to you at your hotel if you will wait for me. I am not able to appoint a time. I can only promise to watch for my first opportunity, and to take advantage of it instantly—for your sake and for mine."

But one interpretation could be placed on such language as this. Lucilla was not a free agent. Both Oscar and the rector were now obliged to acknowledge that my view of the case had been the correct one. If it was impossible for me to be received into the house, how doubly impossible would it be for the men to gain admission! Oscar, after reading the note, withdrew to the further end

of the room ; keeping his thoughts to himself. Mr. Finch decided on stepping out of his secondary position by forthwith taking a course of his own.

“ Am I to infer,” he began, “ that it is really useless for me to attempt to see my own child ?”

“ Her letter speaks for itself,” I replied. “ If you attempt to see her, you will probably be the means of preventing your daughter from coming here.”

“ In my parental capacity,” continued Mr. Finch, “ it is impossible for me to remain passive. As a brother-clergyman, I have, I conceive, a claim on the rector of the parish. It is quite likely that notice may have been already given of this fraudulent marriage. In that case, it is not only my duty to myself and my child—it is my duty to the Church, to confer with my reverend colleague. I go to confer with him.” He strutted to the door, and added, “ If Lucilla arrives in my absence, I invest you with my authority, Madame Pra-

tolungo, to detain her until my return." With that parting charge to me, he walked out.

I looked at Oscar. He came slowly towards me from the other end of the room.

"You will wait here, of course?" he said.

"Of course. And you?"

"I shall go out for a little while."

"For any particular purpose?"

"No. To get through the time. I am weary of waiting."

I felt positively assured, from the manner in which he answered me, that he was going—now he had got rid of Mr. Finch—straight to his cousin's house.

"You forget," I said, "that Lucilla may come here while you are out. Your presence in the room, or in the room next to this, may be of the greatest importance, when I tell her what your brother has done. Suppose she refuses to believe me? What am I to do if I have not got you to appeal to? In your own interests, as well as in Lucilla's, I request you to remain here with me till she comes."

Putting it on that ground only, I waited to see what he would do. After a certain hesitation, he answered with a sullen assumption of indifference, "Just as you please!"—and walked away again towards the other end of the room. As he turned his back on me, I heard him say to himself, "It's only waiting a little longer!"

"Waiting for what?" I asked.

He looked round at me over his shoulder.

"Patience for the present!" he answered. "You will hear soon enough." For the moment, I said no more to him. The tone in which he had replied warned me that it would be useless.

After an interval—how long an interval I cannot well say—I heard the sound of women's dresses in the passage outside.

The instant after, there was a knock at the door.

I signed to Oscar to open a second door, close by him at the lower end of the room, and (for the moment at least) to keep out of

sight. Then I answered the knock, and said as steadily as I could, "Come in."

A woman unknown to me entered, dressed like a respectable servant. She came in leading Lucilla by the hand. My first look at my darling told me the horrible truth. As I had seen her in the corridor at the rectory on the first day when we met, so I now saw her once more. Again, the sightless eyes turned on me, insensibly reflecting the light that fell on them. Blind! Oh, God, after a few brief weeks of sight, blind again!

In that miserable discovery, I forgot everything else. I flew to her, and caught her in my arms. I cast one look at her pale, wasted face—and burst out crying on her bosom.

She held my head gently with one hand, and waited with the patience of an angel until that first outbreak of my grief had exhausted itself. "Don't cry about my blindness," said the soft, sweet voice that I knew so well. "The days when I had my sight have been the unhappiest days of my life. If

I look as if I had been fretting, don't think it is about my eyes." She paused, and sighed bitterly. "I may tell *you*," she went on in a whisper. "It's a relief, it's a consolation, to tell *you*. I am fretting about my marriage."

Those words roused me. I lifted my head, and kissed her. "I have come back to comfort you," I said : "and I have behaved like a fool."

She smiled faintly. "How like you," she exclaimed, "to say that !" She tapped my cheek with her fingers in the old familiar way. The repetition of that little trifling action almost broke my heart. I nearly choked myself in forcing back the stupid cowardly useless tears that tried to burst from me again. "Come !" she said. "No more crying ! Let us sit down and talk as if we were at Dimchurch."

I took her to the sofa : we sat side by side. She put her arm round my waist, and laid her head on my shoulder. Again the faint smile flickered like a dying light on her lovely face ;

wan and wasted, yet still beautiful—still the Virgin's face in Raphael's picture. "We are a strange pair," she said, with a momentary flash of her old irresistible humour. "You are my bitterest enemy, and you burst out crying over me the moment we meet. I have been shockingly treated by you—and I have got my arm round your waist and my head on your shoulder, and I wouldn't let go of you for the world!" Her face saddened again; her voice suddenly altered its tone. "Tell me," she went on, "how is it that appearances were so terribly against you? Oscar satisfied me, at Ramsgate, that I ought to give you up, that I ought never to see you again. I took his view—there is no denying it, my dear—I agreed with him in detesting you, for a little while. But, when the blindness came back, I could keep it up no longer. Little by little, as the light died out, my heart *would* turn to you again. When I heard your letter read, when I knew that you were near me—it was just like the old times; I was

mad to see you. And here I am—satisfied, before you explain it to me, that you have been the victim of some terrible mistake.”

I tried, in grateful acknowledgment of those generous words, to enter on my justification there and then. It was impossible. I could think of nothing, I could speak of nothing, but the dreadful discovery of her blindness.

“Give me a few minutes,” I said, “and you shall hear it all. “I can’t talk of myself, yet—I can only talk of you. Oh, Lucilla, why did you keep away from Grosse? Come with me to him to-day. Let him try what he can do. At once, my love—before it is too late!”

“It *is* too late,” she said. “I have been to another oculist—a stranger. He said, what Mr. Sebright said: he doubted if there was ever any chance for me; he thought the operation ought never to have been performed.”

“Why did you go to a stranger?” I asked. “Why did you give up Grosse?”

"You must ask Oscar," she answered. "It was at his desire that I kept away from Grosse?"

Hearing this, I penetrated for myself the motive which had actuated Nugent—as I afterwards found it set forth in the Journal. If he had let Lucilla go to Grosse, our good German might have noticed that her position was preying on her mind, and might have seen his reasons for exposing the deception that Nugent was practising on her. For the rest, I still persisted in entreating Lucilla to go back with me to our old friend.

"Remember our conversation on this very subject," she rejoined, shaking her head decisively. "I mean at the time when the operation was going to be performed. I told you I was used to being blind. I said I only wanted to recover my sight, to see Oscar. And when I did see him—what happened? The disappointment was so dreadful, I wished myself blind again. Don't start! don't cry out as if you were shocked! I mean what I

say. You people who can see, attach such an absurd importance to your eyes! Don't you recollect my saying that when we last talked about it?"

I recollected perfectly. She had said those words. She had declared that she had never honestly envied any of us the use of our eyes. She had even reviled our eyes; comparing them contemptuously with *her* touch; deriding them as deceivers who were constantly leading us wrong. I acknowledged all this—without being in the least reconciled to the catastrophe that had happened. If she would only have listened to me, I should still have gone on obstinately pleading with her. But she flatly refused to listen. "We have very little time to spare," she said. "Let us talk of something more interesting before I am obliged to leave you."

"Obliged to leave me?" I repeated. "Are you not your own mistress?"

Her face clouded over; her manner became embarrassed.

"I cannot honestly tell you that I am a prisoner," she answered. "I can only say I am watched. When Oscar is away from me, Oscar's cousin—a sly, suspicious, false woman—always contrives to put herself in his place. I heard her say to her husband that she believed I should break my marriage engagement unless I was closely looked after. I don't know what I should do, but for one of the servants in the house, who is an excellent creature—who sympathises with me, and helps me." She stopped, and lifted her head inquiringly. "Where *is* the servant?" she asked.

I had forgotten the woman who had brought her into the room. She must have delicately left us together after leading Lucilla in. When I looked up, she was not to be seen.

"The servant is no doubt waiting downstairs," I said. "Go on."

"But for that good creature," Lucilla resumed, "I should never have got here. She brought me your letter, and read it to me,

and wrote my reply. I arranged with her to slip out at the first opportunity. One chance was in our favour—we had only the cousin to keep an eye on us. Oscar was not in the house.”

She suddenly checked herself at the last word. A slight sound at the lower end of the room, which had passed unnoticed by me, had caught her delicate ear. “What is that noise?” she asked. “Anybody in the room with us?”

I looked up once more. While she was talking of the false Oscar, the true Oscar was standing listening to her, at the other end of the room.

When he discovered that I was looking at him, he entreated me by a gesture not to betray his presence. He had evidently heard what we had been saying to each other, before I detected him—for he touched his eyes, and lifted his hands pityingly in allusion to Lucilla’s blindness. Whatever his mood might be, that melancholy discovery must surely have affected him—Lucilla’s influence

over him now, *could* only be an influence for good ? I signed to him to remain—and told Lucilla that there was nothing to be alarmed about. She went on.

“Oscar left us for London early this morning,” she said. “Can you guess what he has gone for ? He has gone to get the Marriage Licence—he has given notice of the marriage at the church ; My last hope is in you. In spite of everything that I can say to him, he has fixed the day for the twenty-first—in two days more ! I have done all I could to put it off ; I have insisted on every possible delay. Oh, if you knew——?” Her rising agitation stifled her utterance for the moment. “I mustn’t waste the precious minutes ; I must get back before Oscar returns,” she went on, rallying again. “Oh, my old friend, you are never at a loss ; you always know what to do ! Find me some way of putting off my marriage. Suggest something which will take them by surprise, and force them to give me time !”

I looked towards the lower end of the room. Listening in breathless interest, Oscar had noiselessly advanced half-way towards us. At a sign from me, he checked himself, and came no farther.

“Do you really mean, Lucilla, that you no longer love him?” I said.

“I can tell you nothing about it,” she answered—“except that some dreadful change has come over me. While I had my sight, I could partly account for it—I believed that the new sense had made a new being of me. But now I have lost my sight again—now I am once more what I have been all my life—still the same horrible insensibility possesses me. I have so little feeling for him, that I sometimes find it hard to persuade myself that he really *is* Oscar. You know how I used to adore him. You know how enchanted I should once have been to marry him. Think of what I must suffer, feeling towards him as I feel now!”

I looked up again. Oscar had stolen

nearer ; I could see his face plainly. The good influence of Lucilla was beginning to do its good work ! I saw the tears rising in his eyes ; I saw love and pity taking the place of hatred and revenge. The Oscar of my old recollections was standing before me once more !

“ I don't want to go away,” Lucilla went on ; “ I don't want to leave him. All I ask for, is a little more time. Time *must* help me to get back again to my old self. My blind days have been the days of my whole life. Can a few weeks of sight have deprived me of the feelings which have been growing in me for years ? I won't believe it ! I can find my way about the house ; I can tell things by my touch ; I can do all that I did in my blindness, just as well as ever, now I am blind again. The feeling for *him* will come back to me like the rest. Only give me time ! only give me time !”

At the last word, she started to her feet in sudden alarm. “ There *is* some one in the

room," she said. "Some one who is crying! Who is it?"

Oscar was close to us. The tears were falling fast over his cheeks—the one faint sobbing breath which had escaped him had caught my ear as well as Lucilla's. I took his hand in one of my hands; and I took Lucilla's hand in the other. For good or for evil, the result rested with God's mercy. The time had come.

"Who is it?" Lucilla repeated impatiently.

"Try if you can tell, my love, without asking me."

With those words, I put her hand in Oscar's hand—and stood close, watching her face.

For one awful moment, when she first felt the familiar touch, the blood left her cheeks. Her blind eyes dilated fearfully. She stood petrified. Then, with a long low cry—a cry of breathless rapture—she flung her arms passionately round his neck. The life flowed back into her face; her lovely smile just trembled on her parted lips; her breath came

faint and quick and fluttering. In soft tones of ecstasy, with her lips on his cheek, she murmured the delicious words :

“ Oh, Oscar ! I know you once more ! ” ·





CHAPTER THE TWELFTH.

THE END OF THE JOURNEY.

A LITTLE interval of time elapsed. Her first exquisite sense of the recognition by touch had passed away. Her mind had recovered its balance. She separated herself from Oscar, and turned to me, with the one inevitable question which I knew must follow the joining of their hands.

“What does it mean?”

The exposure of Nugent’s perfidy; the revelation of the fatal secret of Oscar’s face; and, last not least, the defence of my own conduct towards her, were all comprehended in the answer for which that question called.

As carefully, as delicately, as mercifully as I could, I disclosed to her the whole truth. How the shock affected her, she did not tell me at the time, and has never told me since. With her hand in Oscar's hand, with her face hidden on Oscar's breast, she listened ; not once interrupting me, from first to last, by so much as a single word. Now and then, I saw her tremble ; now and then I heard her sigh heavily. That was all. It was only when I had ended—it was only after a long interval during which Oscar and I watched her in speechless anxiety—that she slowly lifted her head and broke the silence.

“ Thank God,” we heard her say to herself fervently—“ Thank God, I am blind !”

Those were her first words. They filled me with horror. I cried out to her to recall them.

She quietly laid her head back on Oscar's breast.

“ Why should I recall them ?” she asked.
“ Do you think I wish to see him disfigured

as he is now ? No ! I wish to see him—and I *do* see him !—as my fancy drew his picture in the first days of our love. My blindness is my blessing. It has given me back my old delightful sensation when I touch him ; it keeps my own beloved image of him—the one image I care for—unchanged and unchangeable. You *will* persist in thinking that my happiness depends on my sight. I look back with horror at what I suffered when I had my sight—my one effort is to forget that miserable time. Oh, how little you know of me ! Oh, what a shock it would be to me, if I saw him as you see him ! Try to understand me, and you won't talk of my loss—you will talk of my gain."

"Your gain ?" I repeated. "What have you gained ?"

"Happiness," she answered. "My life lives in my love. And my love lives in my blindness."

There was the story of her whole existence—told in two words !

If you had seen her radiant face as she raised it again in the excitement of speaking ; if you had remembered (as I remembered) what her surgeon had said of the penalty which she must inevitably pay for the recovery of her sight—how would you have answered her ? It is barely possible, perhaps, that you might have done what I did. That is to say : You might have modestly admitted that she knew what the conditions of her happiness were better than you—and you might not have answered her at all !

I left them to talk together, and took a turn in the room, considering with myself what we were to do next.

It was not easy to say. The barren information which I had received from my darling was all the information that I possessed. Nugent had unflinchingly carried his cruel deception to its end. He had falsely given notice of his marriage at the church, in his brother's name ; and he was now in London,

falsely obtaining his Marriage Licence, in his brother's name also. So much I knew of his proceedings—and no more.

While I was still pondering, Lucilla cut the Gordian knot.

“Why are we stopping here?” she asked.
“Let us go—and never return to this hateful place again!”

As she rose to her feet, we were startled by a soft knock at the door.

I answered the knock. The woman who had brought Lucilla to the hotel appeared once more. She seemed to be afraid to venture far from the door. Standing just inside the room, she looked nervously at Lucilla, and said, “Can I speak to you, Miss?”

“You can say anything you like, before this lady and gentleman,” Lucilla answered.
“What is it?”

“I’m afraid we have been followed, Miss.”

“Followed? By whom?”

“By the lady’s-maid. I saw her, a little while since, looking up at the hotel—and then

she went back in a hurry on the way to the house—and that's not the worst of it, Miss."

"What else has happened?"

"We have made a mistake about the railway," said the woman. "There's a train from London that we didn't notice in the timetable. They tell me down-stairs it came in more than a quarter of an hour ago. Please to come back, Miss—or I fear we shall be found out."

"You can go back at once, Jane," said Lucilla.

"By myself?"

"Yes. Thank you for bringing me here—here I remain."

She had barely taken her seat again between Oscar and me, before the door was softly opened from the outside. A long thin nervous hand stole in through the opening; took the servant by the arm; and drew her out into the passage. In her place, a man entered the room with his hat on. The man was Nugent Dubourg.

He stopped where the servant had stopped. He looked at Lucilla ; he looked at his brother ; he looked at me.

Not a word fell from him. There he stood, fronting the friend whom he had calumniated and the brother whom he had betrayed. There he stood—with his eyes fixed on Lucilla, sitting between us—knowing that it was all over ; knowing that the woman for whom he had degraded himself, was a woman parted from him for ever. There he stood, in the hell of his own making—and devoured his torture in silence.

On his brother's appearance, Oscar had risen, and had raised Lucilla with him. He now advanced a step towards Nugent, still holding to him his betrothed wife.

I followed them, eagerly watching his face. There was no fear in me now of what he might do. Lucilla's blessed influence had found, and cast out, the lurking demon that had been hidden in him. With a mind attentive but not alarmed, I waited to see how he

would meet the emergency that confronted him.

“Nugent!” he said, very quietly.

Nugent’s head drooped—he made no answer.

Lucilla, hearing Oscar pronounce the name, instantly understood what had happened. She shuddered with horror. Oscar gently placed her in my arms, and advanced again alone towards his brother. His face expressed the struggle in him of some subtly-mingling influences of love and anguish, of sorrow and shame. He recalled to me in the strangest manner my past experience of him, when he had first trusted me with the story of the Trial, and when he had told me that Nugent was the good angel of his life.

He went up to the place at which his brother was standing. In the simple, boyish way, so familiar to me in the bygone time, he laid his hand on his brother’s arm.

“Nugent!” he said. “Are you the same dear good brother who saved me from dying

on the scaffold, and who cheered my hard life afterwards ? Are you the same bright, clever, noble fellow that I was always so fond of, and so proud of ?”

He paused, and removed his brother's hat. With careful, caressing hand, he parted his brother's ruffled hair over the forehead. Nugent's head sank lower. His face was distorted, his hands were clenched, in the dumb agony of remembrance which that tender voice and that kind hand had set loose in him. Oscar gave him time to recover himself : Oscar spoke next to me.

“ You know Nugent,” he said. “ You remember, when we first met, my telling you that Nugent was an angel ? You saw for yourself, when he came to Dimchurch, how kindly he helped me ; how faithfully he kept my secrets ; what a true friend he was. Look at him—and you will feel, as I do, that we have misunderstood and misinterpreted him, in some monstrous way.” He turned again to Nugent. “ I daren't tell you,” he went

on, "what I have heard about you, and what I have believed about you, and what vile unbrotherly thoughts I have had of being revenged on you. Thank God, they are gone! My dear fellow, I look back at them—now I see you—as I might look back at a horrible dream. How *can* I see you, Nugent, and believe that you have been false to me? You, a villain who has tried to rob poor Me of the only woman in the world who cares for me! You, so handsome and so popular, who may marry any woman you like! It can't be. You have drifted innocently into some false position without knowing it. Defend yourself! No. Let *me* defend you. You shan't humble yourself to anybody. Tell me how you have really acted towards Lucilla, and towards me—and leave it to your brother to set you right with everybody. Come, Nugent! lift up your head—and tell me what I shall say."

Nugent lifted his head, and looked at Oscar.

Ghastly as his face was, I saw something in his eyes, when he first fixed them on his brother, which again reminded me of past days—the days when he had joined us at Dimchurch, and when he used to talk of “poor Oscar” in the tender, light-hearted way that first won me. I thought once more of the memorable night-interview between us at Browndown, when Oscar had left England. Again, I called to mind the signs which had told of the nobler nature of the man pleading with him. Again, I remembered the remorse which had moved him to tears—the effort he had made in my presence to atone for past misdoing, and to struggle for the last time against the guilty passion that possessed him. Was the nature which could feel that remorse utterly depraved? Was the man who had made that effort—the last of many that had gone before it—irredeemably bad?

“Wait!” I whispered to Lucilla, trembling and weeping in my arms. “He will deserve

our sympathy ; he will win our pardon and our pity, yet !”

“ Come !” Oscar repeated. “ Tell me what I shall say.”

Nugent drew from his pocket a sheet of paper with writing on it.

“ Say,” he answered, “ that I gave notice of your marriage at the church here—and that I went to London and got you *this*.”

He handed the sheet of paper to his brother. It was the Marriage Licence, taken out in his brother’s name.

“ Be happy, Oscar,” he added. “ *You* deserve it.”

He threw one arm in his old easy protecting way round his brother. His hand, as he did this, touched the breast-pocket of Oscar’s coat. Before it was possible to stop him, his dexterous fingers had opened the pocket, and had taken from it a little toy-pistol with a chased silver handle of Oscar’s own workmanship.

“ Was this for me ?” he asked, with a faint

smile. "My poor boy! you could never have done it, could you?" He kissed Oscar's dark cheek, and put the pistol into his own pocket. "The handle is your work," he said. "I shall take it as your present to me. Return to Browndown when you are married. I am going to travel again. You shall hear from me before I leave England. God bless you, Oscar. Good-bye."

He put his brother back from him with a firm and gentle hand. I attempted to advance with Lucilla, and speak to him. Something in his face—looking at me out of his mournful eyes, calm, stern, and superhuman, like a look of doom—warned me back from him, and filled me with the foreboding that I should see him no more. He walked to the door, and opened it—turned—and, fixing his farewell look on Lucilla, saluted us silently with a bend of his head. The door closed on him softly. In a few minutes only from the time when he had entered the room, he had left us again—and left us for ever.

We waited, spell-bound — we could not speak. The void that he left behind him was dreary and dreadful. I was the first who moved. In silence, I led Lucilla back to our seat on the sofa, and beckoned to Oscar to go to her in my place.

This done, I left them—and went out to meet Lucilla's father, on his return to the hotel. I wished to prevent him from disturbing them. After what had happened, it was good for those two to be alone.





EPILOGUE.

MADAME PRATOLUNGO'S LAST WORDS.

TWELVE years have passed since the events happened which it has been the business of these pages to relate. I am at my desk ; looking idly at all the leaves of writing which my pen has filled, and asking myself if there is more yet to add, before I have done.

There is more—not much.

Oscar and Lucilla claim me first. Two days after they were restored to each other at Sydenham, they were married at the church in that place. It was a dull wedding. Nobody was in spirits but Mr. Finch. We

parted in London. The bride and bridegroom returned to Browndown. The rector remained in town for a day or two visiting some friends. I went back to my father, to accompany him, as I had promised, on his journey from Marseilles to Paris.

As well as I remember, I remained a fortnight abroad. In the course of that time, I received kind letters from Browndown. One of them announced that Oscar had heard from his brother.

Nugent's letter was not a long one. It was dated at Liverpool, and it announced his embarkation for America in two hours' time. He had heard of a new expedition to the Arctic regions—then fitting out in the United States—with the object of discovering the open Polar sea, supposed to be situated between Spitzbergen and Nova Zembla. It had instantly struck him that this expedition offered an entirely new field of study to a landscape painter in search of the sublimest aspects of Nature. He had decided on volunteering to

join the Arctic explorers—and he had already raised the necessary money for his outfit by the sale of the only valuables he possessed—his jewellery and his books. If he wanted more, he engaged to apply to Oscar. In any case, he promised to write again, before the expedition sailed. And so, for the present only, he would bid his brother and sister affectionately farewell.—When I afterwards looked at the letter myself, I found nothing in it which referred in the slightest degree to the past, or which hinted at the state of the writer's own health and spirits.

I returned to our remote Southdown village; and occupied the room which Lucilla had herself prepared for me at Brown-down.

I found the married pair as tranquil and as happy in their union as a man and woman could be. The absent Nugent dwelt a little sadly in their minds at times, I suspect, as well as in mine. It was perhaps on this account, that Lucilla appeared to me to be

quieter than she used to be in her maiden days. However, my presence did something towards restoring her to her old spirits—and Grosse's speedy arrival exerted its enlivening influence in support of mine.

As soon as the gout would let him get on his feet, he presented himself with his instruments, at Browndown, eager for another experiment on Lucilla's eyes.

"If my operations had failed," he said, "I should not have plagued you no more. But my operations has not failed : it is you who have failed to take care of your nice new eyes when I gave them to you."

In those terms he endeavoured to persuade her to let him attempt another operation. She steadily refused to submit to it—and the discussion that followed roused her famously.

More than once afterwards Grosse tried to make her change her mind. He tried in vain. The disputes between the two made the house ring again. Lucilla found all her

old gaiety, in refuting the grotesque arguments and persuasions of our worthy German. To me—when I once or twice attempted to shake her resolution—she replied in another way, merely repeating the words she had said to me at Sydenham : “ My life lives in my love. And my love lives in my blindness.” It is only right to add that Mr. Sebright, and another competent authority consulted with him, declared unhesitatingly that she was right. Under any circumstances, Mr. Sebright was of opinion that the success of Grosse’s operation could never have been more than temporary. His colleague, after examining Lucilla’s eyes, at a later period, entirely agreed with him. Which was in the right—these two or Grosse—who can say ? As blind Lucilla, you first knew her. As blind Lucilla, you see the last of her now. If you feel inclined to regret this, remember that the one thing essential was the thing she possessed. Her life was a happy one. Bear this in mind—and don’t forget that your con-

ditions of happiness need not necessarily be her conditions also.

In the time I am now writing of, the second letter from Nugent arrived. It was written the evening before he sailed for the Polar seas. One line in it touched us deeply. "Who knows whether I shall ever see England again? If a boy is born to you, Oscar, call him by my name—for my sake."

Enclosed in this letter was a private communication from Nugent, addressed to me. It was the confession to which I have alluded in my notes attached to Lucilla's Journal. These words only were added at the end: "You now know everything. Forgive me—if you can. I have not escaped without suffering; remember that." After making use of the narrative, as you already know, I have burnt it all, except those last lines.

At distant intervals, we heard twice of the exploring ship, from whaling vessels. Then, there was a long dreary interval, without news of any sort. Then, a dreadful report that the

expedition was lost. Then, the confirmation of the report—a lapse of a whole year, and no tidings of the missing men.

They were well provided with supplies of all kinds ; and there was a general hope that they might be holding out. A new expedition was sent—and sent vainly—in search of them overland. Rewards were offered to whaling vessels to find them, and were never earned. We wore mourning for Nugent ; we were a melancholy household. Two more years passed—before the fate of the expedition was discovered. A ship in the whale trade, driven out of her course, fell in with a wrecked and dismantled vessel, lost in the ice. Let the last sentences of the captain's report tell the story.

“ * * * The wreck was drifting along a channel of open water, when we first saw it. Before long, it was brought up by an iceberg. I got into my boat with some of my sailors, and we rowed to the vessel.

“ Not a man was to be seen on the deck, . . .

which was covered with snow. We hailed, and got no reply. I looked in through one of the circular glazed port-holes astern, and saw dimly the figure of a man seated at a table. I knocked on the thick glass, but he never moved. We got on deck, and opened the cabin hatchway, and went below. The man I had seen was before us, at the end of the cabin. I led the way, and spoke to him. He made no answer. I looked closer, and touched one of his hands which lay on the table. To my horror and astonishment, he was a frozen corpse.

“On the table before him was the last entry in the ship's log :

“‘Seventeen days since we have been shut up in the ice ! Our fire went out yesterday. The captain tried to light it again, and has failed. The surgeon and two seamen died of cold this morning. The rest of us must soon follow. If we are ever discovered, I beg the person who finds me to send this——’

“ There the hand that held the pen had dropped into the writer’s lap. The left hand still lay on the table. Between the frozen fingers, we found a long lock of a woman’s hair, tied at each end with a blue ribbon. The open eyes of the corpse were still fixed on the lock of hair.

“ The name of this man was found in his pocket-book. It was Nugent Dubourg. I publish the name in my report, in case it may meet the eyes of his friends.

“ Examination of the rest of the vessel, and comparison of dates with the date of the log-book, showed that the officers and crew had been dead for more than two years. The positions in which we found the frozen men, and the names where it was possible to discover them, are here set forth as follows.
* * * ”

That “ lock of a woman’s hair ” is now in Lucilla’s possession. It will be buried with her, at her own request, when she dies. Ah,

poor Nugent ! Are we not all sinners ? Remember the best of him, and forget the worst, as I do.

I still linger over my writing—reluctant to leave it, if the truth must be told. But what more is there to say ? I hear Oscar hammering away at his chasing, and whistling blithely over his work. In another room, Lucilla is teaching the piano to her little girl. On my table is a letter from Mrs. Finch, dated from one of our distant colonies—over which Mr. Finch (who has risen gloriously in the world) presides pastorally as bishop. He harangues the “ natives ” to his heart’s content : and the wonderful natives like it. “ Jicks ” is in her element among the aboriginal members of her father’s congregation : there are fears that the wandering Arab of the Finch family will end in marrying “ a chief.” Mrs. Finch—I don’t expect you to believe this—is anticipating another confinement.

Lucilla’s eldest boy—called Nugent—has just come in, and stands by my desk. He

lifts his bright blue eyes up to mine ; his round rosy face expresses strong disapproval of what I am doing. "Aunty," he says, "you have written enough. Come and play."

The boy is right, I must put away my manuscript and leave you. My excellent spirits are a little dashed at parting. I wonder whether you are sorry too ? I shall never know ! Well, I have many blessings to comfort me, on closing my relations with you. I have kind souls who love me ; and—observe this !—I stand on my political principles as firmly as ever. The world is getting converted to my way of thinking : the Pratolungo programme, my friends, is coming to the front with giant steps. Long live the Republic ! Farewell.

THE END.

FOUR MISS FINCH

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"THE WOMAN IN WHITE"

